FEBRUARY 2025

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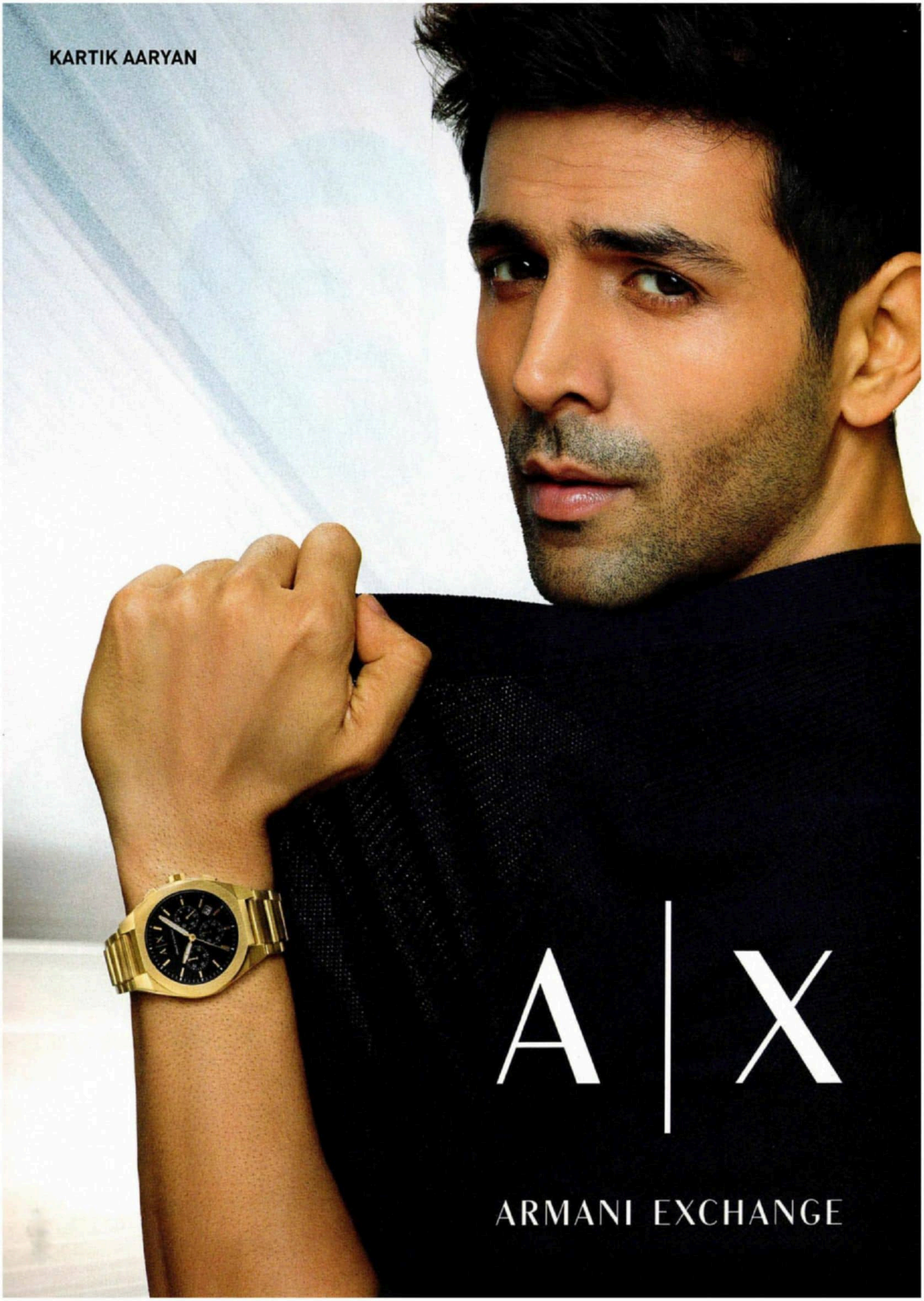
CT 2025: BATTLE OF THE HEAVYWEIGHTS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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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The ICC Champions Trophy 2025 will start on February 19, with the host nation Pakistan taking on New Zealand. Eight teams, India, Pakistan, New Zealand, Bangladesh, Australia, England, South Africa, and Afghanistan, have been divided into two groups, and the two teams of each group will play in the semi-finals. The Men in Blue will play all their matches in Dubai due to political differences with Pakistan, and if Rohit Sharma's team manages to make it to the knockout, their semi-final and the final will also be scheduled in Dubai. Pakistan are the defending champions, but their unpredictability is the biggest concern. They defeated Australia and South Africa in the away ODI series but recently lost to New Zealand at home. They will miss Saim Ayub, who was ruled out of the tournament due to a leg injury. For India, Jasprit Bumrah is likely to miss the Champions Trophy after failing to recover from a back injury. Australia are the team most impacted by fitness issues. Their captain, Pat Cummins, senior speedster Josh Hazlewood, and all-rounder Mitchell Marsh are out, while Marcus Stoinis announced a sudden retirement from the fifty-over format. New Zealand are looking strong, and they have players who can perform in any conditions. South Africa have been making headlines in the last couple of years, and despite missing key players, the Proteas have managed to qualify for the finals of the big tournament. England have been completely dismantled by India in T20Is and ODIs and they will enter the tournament without any confidence. Afghanistan are giant killers, and they can upset big teams in the Champions Trophy. Their spin attack, led by Rashid Khan, could put the rivals in trouble. They made it to the semi-final of the ICC T20 World Cup 2024. Bangladesh is not in form, and the subcontinent team will struggle in the big event. They will miss the services of star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan. For me, India, Pakistan, South Africa, and Australia are likely to make it to the semis. In the world of other sports, British heavyweight Tyson Fury has retired from boxing — again — one month after losing a rematch with Ukrainian Oleksandr Usyk. The 36-year-old Fury announced the decision in a short video posted on his Instagram account, which included a cryptic message. British boxing fans had been hoping that Fury would next fight countryman Anthony Joshua, a bout that has been talked about for years but now looks unlikely to happen. Fury announced his retirement before, but notably on his 34th birthday in August 2022. Enjoy the action-packed edition of Cricket Today.

The ICC Champions Trophy 2025 will start on February 19, with the host nation Pakistan taking on New Zealand.

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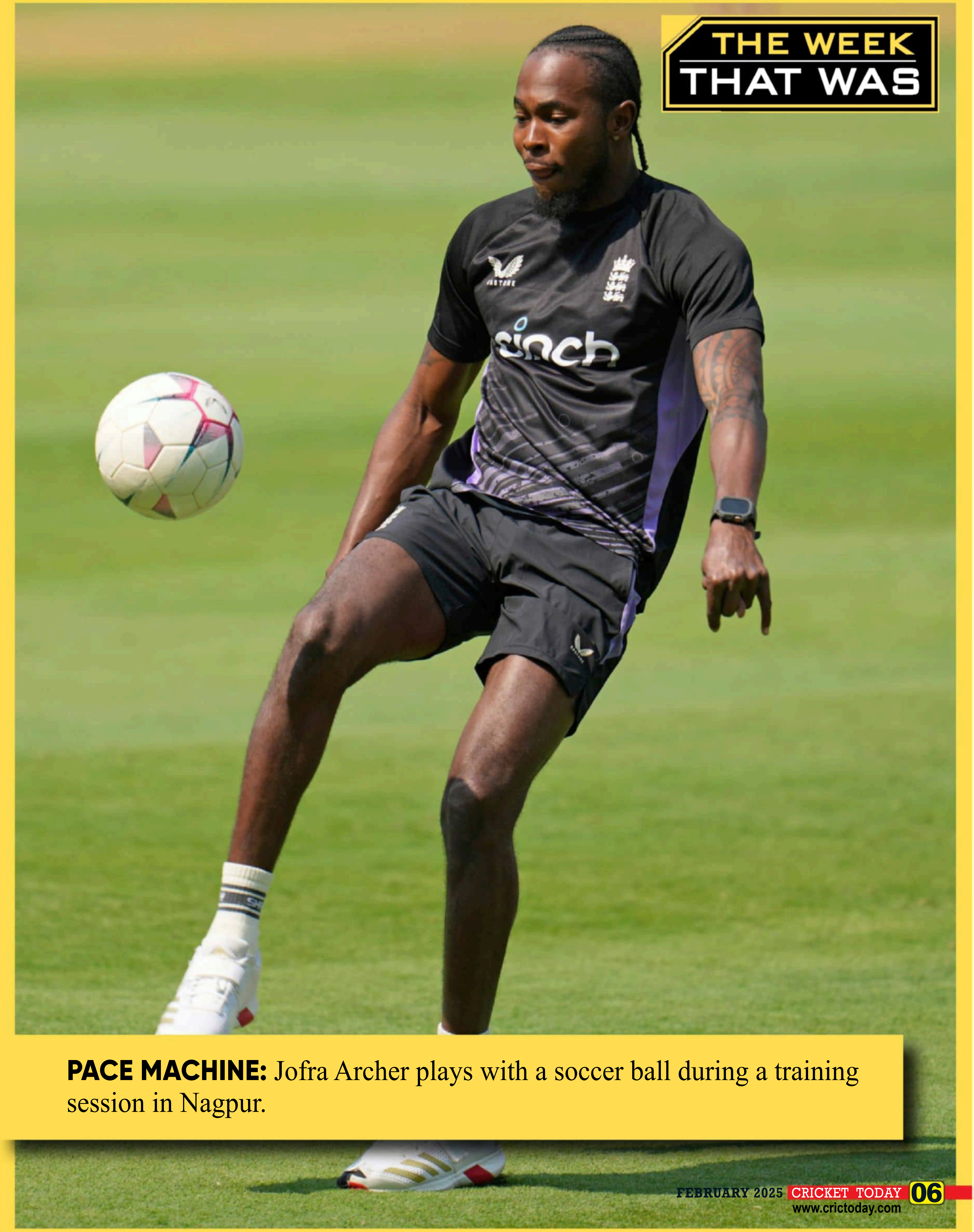
THE WEEK THAT WAS

RETURN OF THE KING: Virat Kohli walks to get a drink after batting in the nets during a training session ahead of the first one-day international cricket match between India and England in Nagpur.



PACE MACHINE: Jofra Archer plays with a soccer ball during a training session in Nagpur.

THE WEEK THAT WAS

STAR DEBUTANT: Brazil's Neymar walks onto the pitch during his debut for Santos FC in a Sao Paulo league soccer match against Botafogo-SP.

TOP OF THE TABLE: Jannik Sinner of Italy poses with Norman Brookes Challenge Cup after defeating Alexander Zverev of Germany in the men's singles final at the Australian Open tennis championship.

THE WEEK THAT WAS

IMPRESSIVE PERFORMANCE: Katerina Sinikova of the Czech Republic and Taylor Townsend of the U.S. jump with their trophy after defeating Hsieh Su-Wei of Taiwan and Jelena Ostapenko of Latvia in the women's doubles final at the Australian Open tennis championship.

WINNING SMILE: Rory McIlroy celebrates at Pebble Beach Golf Links after winning the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am golf tournament.

Cricket Buzz

"He is scoring runs and has been one of the best batters in the last two years"

- Aakash Chopra slams critics of Shubman Gill

BIASED ATTITUDE OF TEAM MANAGEMENT

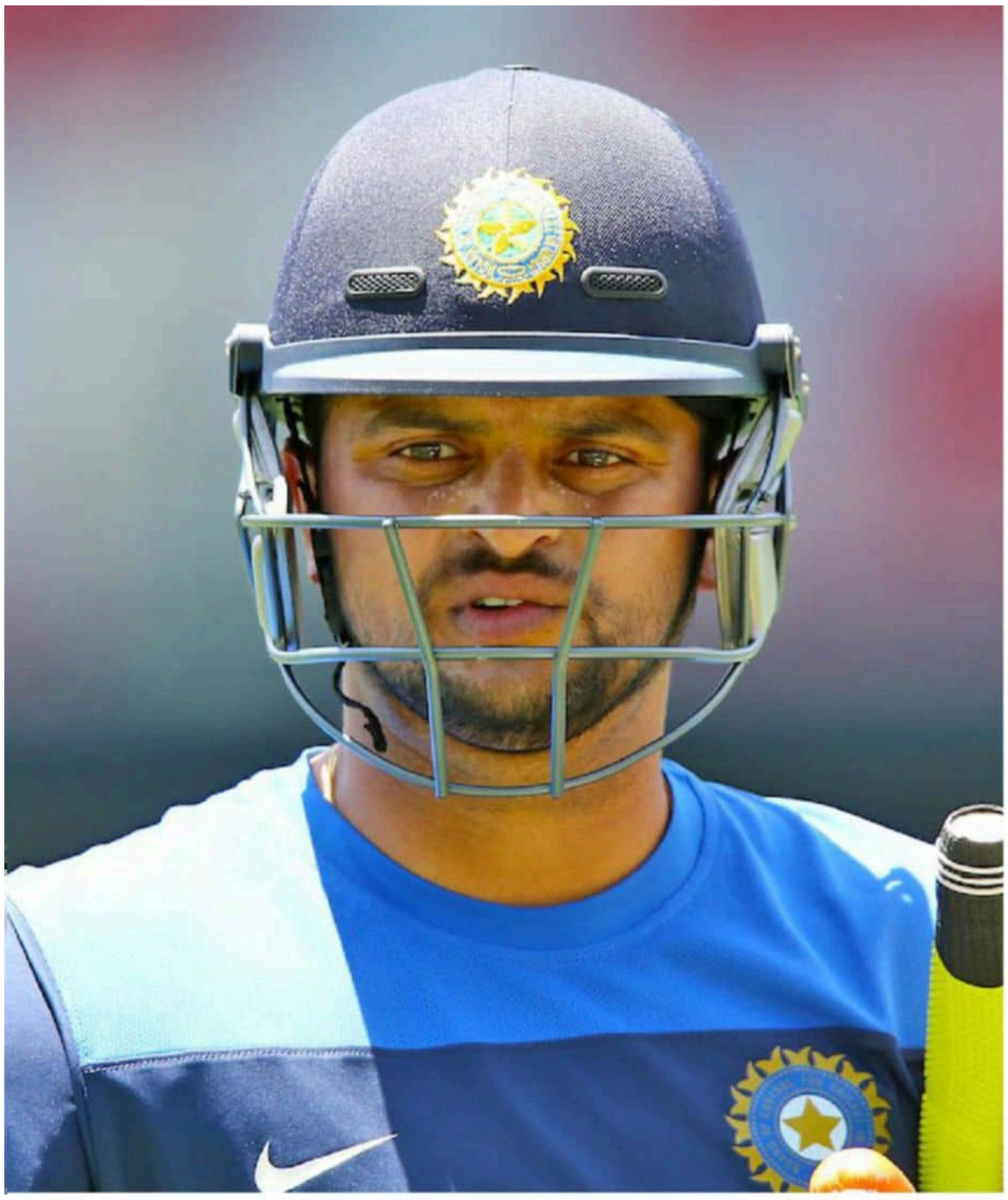
The Indian team management is responsible for KL Rahul's ordinary performances throughout his international career. He is the only player in the world whose batting order is not fixed, and the batter is paying a heavy price. The Karnataka-based batter hasn't been able to cement his place across formats and is no longer part of the T20I team. Former player Aakash Chopra highlighted the same issue in the first ODI against England in Nagpur. "Nobody except Rohit Sharma performed in Sri Lanka, but KL Rahul was the only one who was dropped. Virat Kohli also failed, but he remained in the playing XI," he said. Sanjay Bangar, who has a habit of justifying even the worst of moves by the team management, finally spoke against the ill-treatment of the wicket-keeper batter.

"He was disappointed with himself. The top athletes maintain standards"

- Sanjay Bangar on Mohammed Shami's first ODI spell after a year

GOING GREAT GUNS

Harshit Rana is going great in his career, with the speedster impressing across formats in international cricket. He took three wickets in the first innings of his debut Test against Australia in Perth. Rana then dismissed three England batters in his first T20I in Pune. Playing his first ODI against the Jos Buttler-led team, he got rid of three batters in Nagpur. Rana has moved ahead of Mohammed Siraj in a one-day format, with the selectors and the team management preferring him over the senior bowler. Parthiv Patel opined on the matter while replying to a fan's question during the first ODI between India and England. "Harshit Rana is a better bowler than Mohammed Siraj, as the latter can't bowl well with the old ball. Rana can create an impact with the old ball and that's why he is in the team," he said.

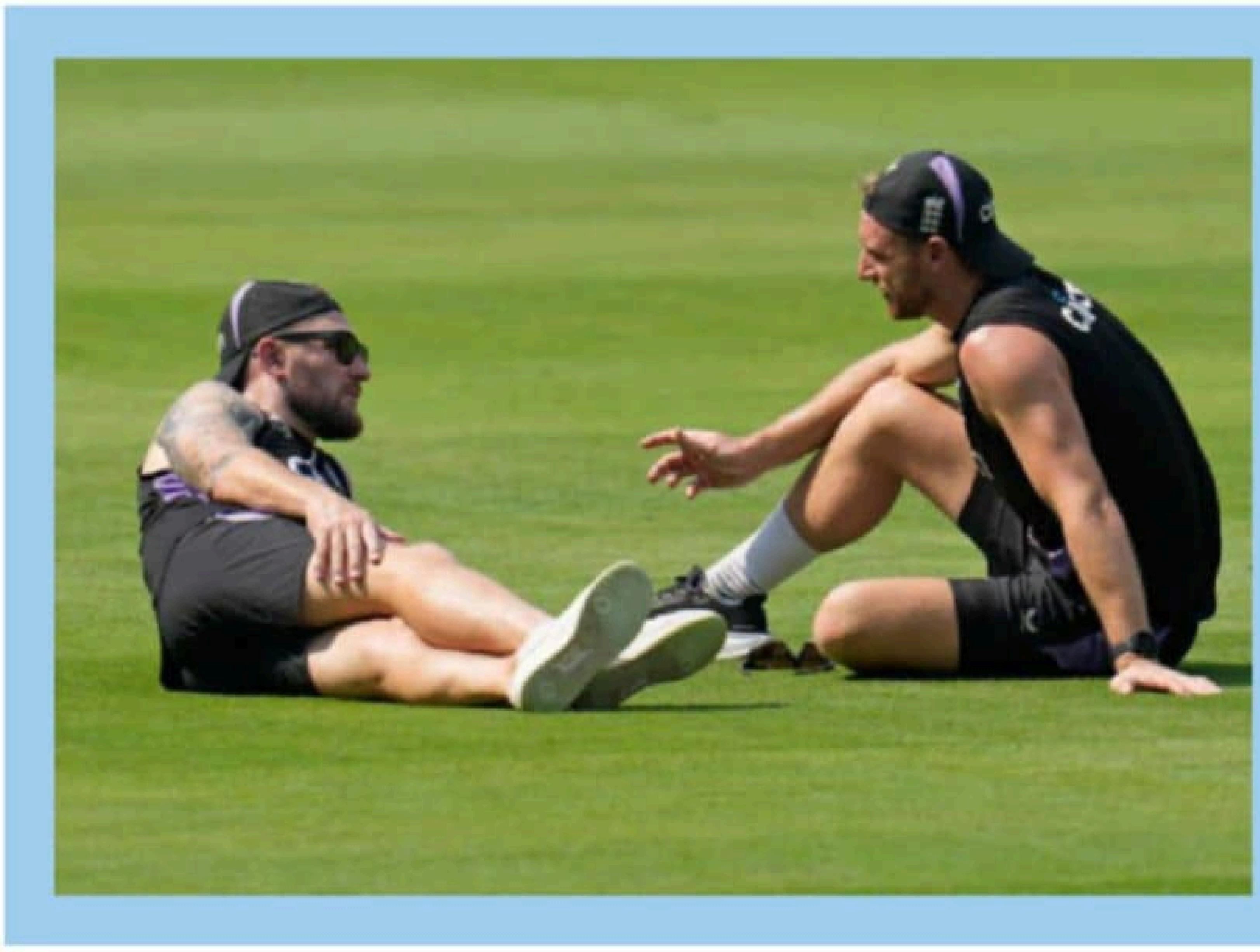


DEADLY PACE TRIO OF INDIA

Jasprit Bumrah is likely to miss the ICC Champions Trophy 2025 as he hasn't recovered from his back injury, which he suffered during the fifth and final Test in Australia. Harshit Rana has strengthened his case in case Jasprit doesn't travel to Dubai for the CT matches. Mohammed Siraj was also in contention earlier, but Rana has ended the senior pacer's chances. The youngster was clinical with the ball, and his pace put the rival batters in trouble. Suresh Raina made a big statement about the partnership between Harshit Rana, Arshdeep Singh, and Mohammed Shami. "Harshit Rana bowled superbly, and his partnership with Mohammed Shami will be crucial. Don't forget, Arshdeep Singh is still there and the trio will prove deadly in the ICC Champions Trophy," Suresh Raina.

MEGA FINAL OF CHAMPIONS TROPHY

Former Pakistan cricketer Shoaib Akhtar has named his semifinalists for the ICC Champions Trophy, which will be co-hosted by Pakistan and the UAE. Matches in Dubai will feature India, while Pakistan will host games in Lahore, Karachi, and Rawalpindi. Given the local conditions, Akhtar believes the Asian teams will have a distinct advantage over the others. Akhtar predicts India and Pakistan will both make it to the semifinals of the tournament. He also backs Afghanistan to secure a spot in the top four. Additionally, Akhtar has backed Pakistan to defeat India in their highly anticipated match on February 23 at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium. The veteran pacer also believes that both India and Pakistan should ideally meet in the final of the prestigious tournament.



IMPACT OF BRENDON MCCULLUM

Brendon McCullum is now England's head coach across formats. Jos Buttler, who leads the English team in ODIs and T20Is, has started playing attacking cricket from the start of his innings. He was phenomenal with the bat in the T20I assignment against the Men in Blue and went on attack in the first fifty-over game with the Rohit Sharma-led team. Buttler scored 52 runs off 67 balls with the help of 4 fours. He started aggressively but slowed down due to a fall of wickets in Nagpur. Former India player Deep Dasgupta hailed McCullum for giving freedom to Jos. "Jos Buttler has become a different cricketer under Brendon McCullum. He is attacking from the first ball of his innings. Earlier, he used to take 8-10 balls before going for the shots. He has been given freedom by McCullum to play aggressively," Deep Dasgupta said on Sports 18.

ICC CHAMPIONS TROPHY: ALL-ROUND INDIA AIM FOR SUB-CONTINENT JOY

The 15-member Indian cricket team for the 2025 ICC Champions Trophy was announced on January 18. Rohit Sharma is set to lead the Men in Blue with Shubman Gill assigned as his deputy. India are placed in Group A alongside New Zealand, Bangladesh and Pakistan....

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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The 15-member Indian cricket team for the 2025 ICC Champions Trophy was announced on January 18. Rohit Sharma is set to lead the Men in Blue with Shubman Gill assigned as his deputy. India are placed in Group A alongside New Zealand, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The Indian side will play its matches in Dubai. The last time this tournament was held, India were beaten in the final by Pakistan in 2017.

Coming to the side, Team India's batting pretty much sums up all the regulars in place. However, India have opted for a pace attack which is devoid of clarity in fitness. Team India isn't sure whether Jasprit Bumrah will make the cut. On the other hand, Mohammed Shami is still not 100% fit. The England series will tell a lot about Shami's fitness but worry remains about Bumrah.

India have selected at least four all-rounders in the side. Three of them are spin all-rounders in the form of Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel and Washington Sundar. There is Hardik Pandya who will fill in as the pace all-rounder. India has a decent side on offer and it remains to be seen how they tick the right boxes and get the desired balance to work it through in Dubai.

HERE ARE THE STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, AND KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM INDIA'S CHAMPIONS TROPHY SQUAD.

India squad: Rohit Sharma (c), Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul, Hardik Pandya, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammad Shami, Arshdeep Singh, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Rishabh Pant, Ravindra Jadeja.

HERE ARE THE STRENGTHS

India's batting boasts strength and character. Rohit and Gill are expected to open the innings. After a poor run of form in Tests, Rohit will hope to get back into his groove in a format he enjoys. Rohit had a dream 2023 World Cup campaign and in the three ODIs he played in 2024 versus Sri Lanka, he delivered 58, 64, and 35. A veteran of 265 matches and close to 11000 runs, Rohit will want to excel in the ODIs versus England before gearing up for the Champions Trophy. Gill is another solid asset in this format. With an average of close to 60 in ODIs, Gill promises fireworks.

Virat Kohli is closing in on 14000 ODI runs. Kohli had a solid ODI World Cup at home in 2024. He then failed in the ODIs against Sri Lanka in 2024, scoring

24, 14 and 20. Kohli, who is a dangerous ploy in the sub-continent, will want to prove his mettle after facing a lot of stick for his form in Tests. At number three, he promises a part of a solid top three. Shreyas Iyer, who has been in top form in domestic cricket of late, forms the crux in the middle order alongside KL Rahul, who will get the onus as a wicketkeeper batter ahead of Rishabh Pant. With all-rounders in the mix, the likes of Pandya, Axar, Jadeja and Sundar will provide the necessary shield. Pandya will be the finisher of this side alongside Axar. Whichever combination is used and whoever plays, India looks to be in safe hands. In Yashasvi Jaiswal, India have a solid backup as an opener. His explosiveness is a positive aspect. In Rishabh Pant, Team India gets a powerful force. He can be a floater if India decide to keep Rahul on the bench.

Spin bowling is India's forte on slower surfaces. Kuldeep Yadav led the attack with his left-arm wrist-spin. Axar is the likely candidate to provide the desired support. If India go in with four pace options, then these two are likely to feature as the main spinners. If India decide to go with three spin options, one between Jadeja and Sundar will come in. Sundar, in particular, could add variety to this spin unit with his right-arm finger spin. India's depth in the all-round department brings plenty of options with a slow surface on offer.

Rohit's leadership and his consistency in ODIs are positive. Under his captaincy, India reached the 2023 ODI World Cup final. India also won the T20 World Cup title in 2024. So one can expect consistency from him. Rohit thrives in white-ball cricket and his numbers are a testament. Rohit has managed India in 48 ODIs, winning 34, losing 12, and one match getting tied (1 N/R). His win percentage is 70.83. Rohit also averages 55.10 as a captain in ODIs.

A LOOK AT THE WEAKNESSES

India left out a strong performer in Mohammed Siraj to accommodate an extra spin-all-rounder. This robs India of a genuine pace option who has been consistent in the 50-over format. India's three-man pace options are solid but there are question marks. Jasprit Bumrah isn't fit at the moment and will need to play in the 3rd ODI versus England to test his limits. His presence is still not sure. Mohammed Shami has made a return

MEN'S T20 WORLD CUP
AUSTRALIA 2022
INDIA

for the England series and will have his work cut out and hope the fitness level is shown. He could be another suspect if an injury comes back. This leaves India with Arshdeep Singh. In 8 ODIs, he owns 12 wickets. India went with Pandya as the 4th seam option. It remains to be seen how he fares given his lack of bowling.

India lack left-handed batters in their top six. Rohit will open with Gill. The likes of Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, Rahul and Pandya will follow suit to form the top six. India's left-handed batters come after number six. Players like Sundar, Jadeja and Axar are all left-handed options. India do have Rishabh Pant as a middle-order batter but he is likely to be 2nd option behind Rahul. This is one big hole in India's line-up which teams will exploit.

PROBABLE PLAYING XI OF INDIA

Rohit Sharma (c), Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul (wk), Hardik Pandya, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohammed Shami, Arshdeep Singh, Jasprit Bumrah.

KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Mohammed Shami: Shami made a strong return to cricket after a long injury layoff. He made an impression for Bengal in a lone Ranji outing before doing a reasonable job in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy and a few games in the Vijay Hazare Trophy. Shami can help India blossom if he bowls at full tilt and remains injury-free.

INDIA ARE IN THE MIX FOR A SEMI-FINAL BERTH

India are one of the sides who will be considered favorites to reach the last 4. There is enough pedigree in the squad to deliver on the slow surfaces in Dubai. For India to make a statement, they need both Bumrah and Shami at their best. Arshdeep's supporting role will be massive as well. In batting, they have enough depth to deliver.

TEAM INDIA'S GROUP STAGE FIXTURES (ALL MATCHES TO START AT 2:30 PM IST)

20 February - India **vs** Bangladesh, Dubai
23 February - India **vs** Pakistan, Dubai
2 March - India **vs** New Zealand, Dubai ■

ICC CHAMPIONS TROPHY 2025: PAKISTAN ARE THE FAVOURITES TO WIN THE TOURNAMENT

Defending champions Pakistan will be aiming to present themselves as an able team to go out and keep hold of the ICC Champions Trophy. In 2017, Pakistan downed arch-rivals India to win the coveted global 50-over tournament.

WASIM
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PAKISTAN
BABAR

BABAR
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PAKISTAN

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Defending champions Pakistan will be aiming to present themselves as an able team to go out and keep hold of the ICC Champions Trophy. In 2017, Pakistan downed arch-rivals India to win the coveted global 50-over tournament. The Mohammad Rizwan-led Pakistan side boasts of an intriguing blend of youth and experience. Pakistan host the tournament beginning on February 19. They are placed in Group A alongside the likes of India, New Zealand, and Bangladesh. Pakistan will miss the services of Saim Ayub, who is recovering from an ankle injury suffered during Pakistan's tour of South Africa. The Pakistan Cricket Board hasn't rushed Ayub and is rather playing the waiting game on his complete recovery. Another player who missed the cut is Abdullah Shafique, who was ignored. Fakhar Zaman, who starred in the Champions Trophy 2017, makes a return. He will lead the line upfront. Pakistan are set to play a tri-series at home as a build-up to the tournament. Notably, Pakistan are a force to be reckoned with. They are a confident group after having sealed recent memorable ODI series wins over the likes of Australia and South Africa away from home.

Ahead of the ICC Champions Trophy, we decode the strengths, weaknesses, and analysis of the Pakistan side.

PAKISTAN SQUAD: Mohammad Rizwan (c), Babar Azam, Fakhar Zaman, Kamran Ghulam, Saud Shakeel, Tayyab Tahir, Faheem Ashraf, Khushdil Shah, Salman Ali Agha, Usman Khan, Abrar Ahmed, Haris Rauf, Mohammad Hasnain, Naseem Shah, Shaheen Shah Afridi.

STRENGTHS OF PAKISTAN

The bowling unit of Pakistan can help them win the coveted prize. They have a dream-pace attack and versatility on offer. Shaheen Afridi, Naseem Shah, and Haris Rauf can torment teams. Mohammad Hasnain is an able back-up customer. Bowling all-rounder Faheem Ashraf is another pace option in the ranks. Afridi owns a total of 119 wickets from just 59 ODIs. His average of 23.14 stands out. In 34 matches on Asian soil, Afridi boasts 69 scalps from 34 matches at just 22.33. His exploits with the new ball will aid Pakistan. As per ESPNcricinfo, he owns 41 wickets in the power play overs in ODIs.

In Naseem Shah, Pakistan got accuracy. In just 20 matches, Naseem has 42 wickets at a splendid 20.02. 22 of his wickets have come in Asia from 11 matches at a sound 19.63. His economy rate of 4.80 shows his control in games. Fast bowler Haris Rauf owns 85 wickets from 42 matches at 25.76. In the middle overs, Rauf owns 35 wickets. He is majestic at the death, averaging a sound 12.45 with 33 scalps under his belt. Hasnain and Ashraf can lend valuable support. They are sound operators and can bat a bit.

Pakistan have an able spin unit. Abrar Ahmed leads the spin show. He has had a fine start to his ODI career, averaging 15-plus. Agha Salman will be counted upon to chip in with the ball as well. He owns 88

wickets in List A cricket and has been rolling his arms consistently for the side of late. Then there is Kamran Ghulam, who can bowl slow left-arm orthodox. The batting all-rounder is the sixth bowling option in Pakistan's starting XI. Batter Khushdeel Shah is in the mix, too. He, too, bowls slow left-arm orthodox and is a decent backup on the bench. Pakistan are also a strong unit with the bat. With an average of 56.73, Babar is closing in on 6000 ODI runs. He will either open or bat at number three. On home soil, Babar is dangerous, he averages 73-plus and owns close to 1500 runs. Saud Shakeel is another vital top-order batter for Pakistan. He has impressed in his start to his ODI career. It will be a massive tournament for Shakeel, who has shown tremendous character in Test cricket. Fakhar Zaman brings plenty of experience to the table. Fakhar averages close to 47 in ODIs, and with 11 tons and 16 fifties, he remains a vital cog.

The middle order of Pakistan gets bolstered by skipper Rizwan. He is a busy player and lends a sense of comfort. The likes of Agha and Ghulam bring more depth to the side in the lower middle order. They are able finishers, too. Tayyab Tahir is likely to fit in at number 7.

WEAKNESSES OF THE PAKISTANI SIDE

Pakistan will miss someone like Saim Ayub dearly. He seemed a real deal at the top and could bolster Pakistan alongside Shakeel or Fakhar. So, his absence could be felt largely. If you look at the bench, Usman Khan is the pure batter. However, he is yet to make his debut in ODIs. He has also had a sorry start to his T20I career. Pakistan could have selected someone like Imam-ul-Haq in the squad. He has strong numbers. So batting depth is a worry.

Khushdil Shah last played an ODI in 2022. He will

have big shoes to fill if he comes on as a finisher for Tayyab. Similarly, Ashraf last played in August 2023 and was dropped thereafter. So, can the player crank things up on the big stage? Pacer Hasnain is the only player who has some pedigree on the bench.

PREDICTED STARTING XI OF PAKISTAN:

Fakhar Zaman, Saud Shakeel, Babar Azam, Mohammad Rizwan (c & wk), Kamran Ghulam, Agha Salman, Tayyab Tahir, Shaheen Afridi, Abrar Ahmed, Haris Rauf, Naseem Shah.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Babar Azam: The stylish Babar has been a consistent force in ODIs. He was excellent in the ODI series against SA. Babar needs to dominate for Pakistan. His big runs and ability to form partnerships will be of immense help. Babar is a big-match player, and this tournament can see the best of him.

PAKISTAN CAN WIN THE PRESTIGIOUS CT TITLE

Pakistan will back themselves to win the Champions Trophy. They are playing at home and in Dubai. These conditions suit their plan. Pakistan have improved since the 2023 ODI World Cup. The recent wins over Australia and South Africa were massive feats. This will provide them a lot of confidence. Rizwan has led the side well, and he will look at the experienced stars in both departments to help his cause. Pakistan should be taken seriously, and teams need to watch out.

SCHEDULE OF PAKISTAN IN THE CHAMPIONS TROPHY

19 Feb – Pakistan **v** New Zealand, National Stadium, Karachi
23 Feb – Pakistan **v** India, Dubai International Cricket Stadium, Dubai
27 Feb – Pakistan **v** Bangladesh, Rawalpindi ■

ICC CHAMPIONS TROPHY 2025: WILL HEAVYWEIGHTS AUSTRALIA ADD MORE GLOSS TO THEIR TROPHY CABINET?

Australia have a habit of making it big in ICC tournaments, and the upcoming Champions Trophy could be another platform for them to add more silverware to their rich cabinet. Australia are two-time winners of the Champions Trophy and six-time winners of the ODI World Cup.

LABUSCHAGNE
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GRAY-NICOLLS
NOVA

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Australia have a habit of making it big in ICC tournaments, and the upcoming Champions Trophy could be another platform for them to add more silverware to their rich cabinet. Australia are two-time winners of the Champions Trophy and six-time winners of the ODI World Cup. That's eight major pieces of silverware in 50-over ICC global tournaments. Notably, the Aussies won the 2023 ODI World Cup in India, and the 2025 Champions Trophy is a massive opportunity for them to showcase their dominance. Australia suffered a blip with Mitchell Marsh getting ruled out of the tourney. Captain Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood are also out of the tournament due to injuries. On the other hand, Marcus Stoinis has announced retirement from the ODI format.

Australia need to find able replacements. One expects a new entrant in the coming days. Many feel, hard-hitter Jake Fraser-McGurk could get a look in. Spencer Johnson is likely to replace Cummins. Ahead of the Champions Trophy, Australia will play a couple of ODIs against Sri Lanka. Australia are placed in Group B of the tournament to be held in Pakistan and the UAE. They are set to face the likes of Afghanistan, England and South Africa in what seems to be a tricky group. However, going by their exploits, the Aussies are expected to come out and make it to the semi-finals. Australia have plenty of experience riding under their sleeves and this means signs of positivity. Ahead of the tournament, we decode the strengths, weaknesses and analysis of the Aussies.

AUSTRALIA SQUAD: Alex Carey, Nathan Ellis, Aaron Hardie, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Marnus Labuschagne, Glenn Maxwell, Matt Short, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc, Adam Zampa (four players will be added)

STRENGTHS OF AUSTRALIA

Australia have a strong batting unit at their disposal. The dangerous Travis Head leads the charge. He smashed 329 runs in six matches during the World Cup 2023 at 54.83, including hitting a century in the

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ICC MEN'S T20
WORLD CUP

final. Head owns 2645 runs in ODIs at 44-plus. His strike rate of 104-plus is a massive plus. Head can take any side to the cleaners and hand Australia the perfect start. Matthew Short is likely to open alongside Head.

In Steve Smith and Marnus Labuschagne, Australia look settled. Labuschagne was another player who excelled in the final of the 2023 ODI World Cup. He brings calmness and can play the perfect support cast. He owns 1778 runs at 36-plus. On the other hand, Smith has 5662 runs in ODIs at 43.55. He owns 12 tons and 34 fifties. Overall in List A cricket, Smith averages close to 47. He is the fulcrum of this side and brings immense value. Wicketkeeper batter Josh Inglis can be a nice blend at number 5. He can chip in with some useful knocks and also play aggressively. Glenn Maxwell will have a massive role to play. The powerful all-rounder played one of the best ODI knocks ever during the 2023 ODI World Cup. Maxwell is closing in on 4000 ODI runs and can be a match-winner. The Aussies have a decent back-up in Alex Carey, who is a reliable player. He owns close to 2000 ODI runs and a strong average of 34.70. His experience will be massive. Australia have plenty of bowling options in their ranks. Mitchell Starc is one of the best pacers in the world. Starc, who is closing in on 250 ODI scalps, recently surpassed 700 international wickets. He is a big fish in ICC tournaments. His strengths with the new ball and at the death are pleasing to watch. In 28 ODIs on Asian soil, Starc has 54 scalps at 26.57.

Nathan Ellis and Aaron Hardie provide able support from the bench. Ellis has just started his ODI journey. A specialist in T20s, he can be a useful tool. Hardie is a pace-bowling all-rounder and will add more depth when called upon.

Adam Zampa leads the spin attack for Australia. He is Australia's 2nd-highest wicket-taker as a spinner in ODIs. With 180 scalps from 106 games, Zampa promises quality offerings. Maxwell will look to support Zampa with his spin offerings. He has 75

scalps under his belt.

WEAKNESSES OF THE AUSSIE SIDE

Australia have a few weaknesses. With Marsh, Cummins, Hazlewood and Stoinis out, Australia will struggle. Short owns just one fifty across nine ODI innings, and he averages an untidy 21.66. If the Aussies rope in Fraser-McGurk as Marsh's replacement, it seems like a weak link. Although he is known for his explosive hitting, an average of 17.40 in ODIs does little justice. His inexperience is a factor as well.

Australia are a bit short in spin. Barring Zampa, they only have Maxwell on offer. Matt Short has hardly bowled in ODIs. If anything happens to Zampa, Australia would suffer. Therefore, a spinner as Marsh's replacement could be of help.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Travis Head: The star attraction of this Aussie side is Head. His exploits will be of massive help. Head can set the tone with his range of shots, and once he gets going, there are few to stop his carnage. Be it any format, Head's stature has grown massively of late. He is one of the stars to watch out for in the tournament.

AUSTRALIA WILL FIGHT FOR THE TITLE

Australia have plenty of bowling options, and they will rely on pace to hunt down opposition. The batting has plenty of steel and if Short manages to showcase his promise, then Head will be a relieved man. Australia are also well stocked with quality in the pace department. Starc is the principle operator. One feels Australia will fight for the title and look sorted to reach the semis.

SCHEDULE OF AUSTRALIA IN THE CHAMPIONS TROPHY

22 Feb – Australia **v** England, Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore
25 Feb – Australia **v** South Africa, Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium, Rawalpindi
28 Feb – Afghanistan **v** Australia, Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore ■

FEATURE

ICC CHAMPIONS TROPHY: INJURY-HIT SOUTH AFRICA ARE IN A POSITION OF BOTHER

South Africa have been dealt a major blow with injuries ahead of the upcoming ICC Champions Trophy to be held in Pakistan and the UAE. Temba Bauma-led South Africa have a quality side on offer with seasoned internationals bolstering the squad.

MAHARAJ
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SHAMSI
49

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

South Africa have been dealt a major blow with injuries ahead of the upcoming ICC Champions Trophy to be held in Pakistan and the UAE. Temba Bauma-led South Africa have a quality side on offer with seasoned internationals bolstering the squad. The Proteas were runners-up in the 2024 ICC Men's T20 World Cup and semi-finalists in the 2023 ODI World Cup. They are also finalists in the upcoming ICC World Test Championship in June. The increasing number of injured players is the biggest issue for the Proteas heading into the Champions Trophy. Several pacers are already out of the season, including Nandre Burger (lower back stress fracture) and Lizaad Williams (knee injury). Anrich Nortje, who was named in the squad, was soon ruled out of SA20 and Champions Trophy 2025 due to a back injury.

Further, Lungi Ngidi was named in the squad, mostly remaining absent for Paarl Royals in the SA20 2025. He has just recovered from a groin injury and is among the most injury-prone players in world cricket. Meanwhile, Wiaan Mulder recovered after healing a broken finger. Champion batter David Miller also injured his right groin and didn't feature for Paarl Royals in the last few games. As per reports, there's uncertainty around his availability for the Champions Trophy 2025. The Proteas will play in a tri-series in Pakistan ahead of the Champions Trophy. In the mega tournament, they are placed in Group B alongside England, Afghanistan, and Australia. It's a tough group for South Africa.

Ahead of the tournament, here we present the Proteas squad's strengths, weaknesses, and analysis.

SOUTH AFRICA'S SQUAD FOR THE CHAMPIONS TROPHY

Temba Bavuma (c), Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Rassie van der Dussen (one player needs to be added).

STRENGTHS OF SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa have a strong batting unit at their disposal. This is also a side that bats deep. Tony de Zorzi, Ryan Rickelton, and Temba Bavuma are options as openers. Tony has played 12 ODIs, scoring 449 runs at 40.81. Ryan Rickelton, who will be seen in the IPL 2025 season, has smashed one fifty in his six outings for the side in ODIs. Skipper Bavuma is the most experienced in this unit. He boasts 1632 runs at 42.92.

Tony and Bavuma are expected to open for the side with Rickelton as cover. The number three, followed by the middle order of SA, is one of the more settled units in the tournament. Rassie van Der Dussen, Tristan Stubbs, Aiden Markram, David Miller, and Heinrich Klaasen fill up the batting. In 68 matches, Rassie owns close to 2500 ODI runs at 48-plus. He owns 20 50-plus scores. The batter has played 16 ODIs on Asian soil and has a decent average of nearly 38. Youngster Tristan Stubbs is only 8 ODIs old, but his numbers look promising at 41.50. Aiden Markram adds stability to the middle order. He owns 2288 runs at 36-plus. Miller and Klaasen, SA, have two powerful finishers. Miller owns close to 4500 ODI runs for SA at 41.57. His average in the last 10 overs read 49.33. His strike rate is 147-plus during this stage. Klaasen is the best asset on offer. His strike rate in the death overs is a staggering 176-plus.

SA are likely to bat with six premium batters, so Stubbs could be limited to the bench. Marco Jansen and Keshav Maharaj are able bowling all-rounders. Their presence means SA have depth until number 8.

SA's spin department has two premier names in, Keshav Maharaj and Tabraiz Shamsi. Maharaj owns 55 ODI scalps from 44 matches at 30.65. His economy rate is a healthy 4.56. Shamsi is the 2nd left-arm spinner in this side. In 53 matches, he owns a decent tally of 73 scalps. Aiden Markram must support these two and get some overs extracted when needed. Markram is a decent part-time spinner and SA will look at him to roll in a few overs.

SA's pace department has Kagiso Rabada, who leads the line. In 103 matches, he has claimed 162 wickets at 27.56. Rabada is one of the best all-format bowlers in the world. Left-arm pacer Jansen will provide stability. He is an able customer and owns 41 scalps from 26 matches.

WEAKNESSES OF SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa are known as a side that dominates in terms of pace. However, the Proteas are in panic mode, with most of their seamers injured. As mentioned, Nortje has already been ruled out of the tournament, while Ngidi remains doubtful. There are question marks over Gerald Coetzee, who hasn't been named yet in the squad. If Coetzee gets fit, he will come in as the 15th member of the team. If Ngidi gets ruled out and Coetzee fails to make the cut, SA will be forced to get in newer faces. Meanwhile, Wiaan Mulder is in the side and could play alongside Rabada and Jansen. However, he lacks the bite and owns just 14 wickets in 20 matches. SA lack a decent spin all-rounder as they remain dependent on Maharaj and Shamsi. On slower surfaces in the sub-continent, another key option with a good track record would have done justice.

PREDICTED PLAYING XI OF SOUTH AFRICA

Tony de Zorzi, Temba Bavuma (c), Rassie van der Dussen, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Heinrich Klaasen (wk), Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj, Kagiso Rabada, Wiaan Mulder, Tabraiz Shamsi.

SOUTH AFRICA COULD MISS OUT ON THE SEMIS

South Africa's injury woes are a concern. Their pace battery looks weak with injuries. Ngidi hasn't played much cricket of late. Even if Coetzee makes the cut, he, too, lacks playing time. Whoever comes in as the duo or one of the player's replacements will lack the experience needed to strike the right chords. SA cannot afford to lose Miller as well. Moreover, with Afghanistan, Australia and England lined up, SA must be at their best. With a fitter squad, that's possible, but at the moment, this looks questionable.

SOUTH AFRICA'S CHAMPIONS TROPHY SCHEDULE

21 February - South Africa **vs** Afghanistan, Karachi
25 February - South Africa **vs** Australia, Rawalpindi
1 March - South Africa **vs** England, Karachi ■

FEATURE

ICC CHAMPIONS TROPHY: JOS BUTTLER-LED ENGLAND HAVE THEIR TASK CUT OUT

The 15-member England cricket team for the 2025 ICC Champions Trophy was announced last month. Jos Buttler is set to lead the Three Lions. England are placed in Group B which has teams like Australia, South Africa and Afghanistan.

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The 15-member England cricket team for the 2025 ICC Champions Trophy was announced last month. Jos Buttler is set to lead the Three Lions. England are placed in Group B which has teams like Australia, South Africa and Afghanistan. It won't be easy for England with three top teams on offer. England's group-stage matches are scheduled in Pakistan. England will be keen to perform well and extract the most from their squad, which looks pretty balanced on paper. The team is currently on a three-series win-less run. Since a poor 2023 ODI World Cup campaign in India, England have lost three successive bilateral series, losing to West Indies (twice) and Australia (once). A lot will rely on how they fare against India in a three-match ODI series starting February 6. One will get a clear picture of England and what they would have in terms of offerings.

As per ESPNcricinfo, England have played 163 ODIs in Asia. They have claimed 76 wins in addition to losing 85. One match has been tied with one match not having a result. All eyes will be on how England batters face spin with their Group B rivals boasting quality names.

Here are the strengths, weaknesses, and key takeaways from England's Champions Trophy squad.

ENGLAND'S 15-MEMBER SQUAD:

Jos Buttler (c), Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Joe Root, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood.

HERE ARE THE STRENGTHS

England have a powerful batting line-up with several powerful hitters in the mix. Phil Salt and Ben Duckett promise an explosive opening combination. Duckett has looked good of late in ODIs. In 5 ODIs last year, he hit one century and two fifties. He will be looking to complement Salt, who is another serious customer. Duckett strikes close to 100 in ODIs. Salt's strike rate of 113-plus in ODIs will boost England during the powerplay. He owns 866 runs at 34-plus from 25 innings.

Joe Root, at number three, is a star attraction. Root last played an ODI in

November 2023. He will be aiming to sharpen his tools in the series against India. He is England's trump card in a vital number three position. With over 6500 runs from 171 ODIs, Root is highly experienced. He has 16 tons and 39 fifties and is an excellent player of spin. He averages 59.25 against spinners on Asian soil in ODIs.

Harry Brook will fill in at number four. He strikes at 100-plus and averages close to 40. Alongside skipper Buttler, Brook can take the game away from opposition teams. With over 5000 runs in ODIs, Buttler can be a menace. He is someone who can come in as a floater. He is England's best batter in white-ball cricket and could make the difference. In Liam Livingstone and Jacob Bethell, England get firepower in the finishing department. Jamie Smith also lends a voice from the bench in this regard.

England boast a quality pace unit and decent all-round options. Jofra Archer and Mark Wood lead the show in the pace department. Their pace can rattle teams. The experience on offer here will also be crucial for the Three Lions. Saqib Mahmood is an interesting backup on the bench. England also have neat pace-bowling all-rounders in Jamie Overton, Brydon Carse and Gus Atkinson. England could play one of them to support Archer and Wood.

The likes of Livingstone and Root can be pivotal with the ball in supporting ace spinner Adil Rashid. The latter is England's most successful ODI spinner. He is also his nation's leading wicket-taker in T20Is. Rashid will enjoy bowling in Pakistan.

A LOOK AT THE WEAKNESSES

One would have liked to see another main spinner alongside Rashid. England lack a genuine spinner and will hence need to rely on Root and Livingstone. Going with an all-out heavy-pace unit, England may have missed the trick here. Three pace-bowling all-rounders seem a bit too much. Two would have sufficed, and a spinner would have made sense. Archer and Wood will play, and England will have three spin-bowling options. So a third seamer will be one between three as Mahmood will warm the bench. If England go for 4 pacers and three spin options in their line-up, the

batting becomes weak as one between Smith and Bethell will need to make way. England could have added a top-order batter to the squad. This is a big miss. If Salt and Duckett fail to get going, they are short in this department and may need to fit in Brook. A proper top-order batter in place of one between Bethell and Smith would have provided more cushion.

Several players in this England side lack experience, and this is another aspect that could come back to bite them.

PROBABLE PLAYING XI OF ENGLAND

Phil Salt, Ben Duckett, Joe Root, Harry Brook, Jos Buttler (c), Jacob Bethell (wk), Liam Livingstone, Brydon Carse, Adil Rashid, Jofra Archer, Mark Wood.

KEY PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Jos Buttler: The English skipper has started the T20I series well with the willow against India and given his experience in the sub-continent in white-ball cricket, Buttler could be a strong force in leading England as a captain and the batting department. At this moment. Buttler averages slightly over 25 in Asia, and this is something he will need to improve upon. The ODI series against India will be a crucial one for him.

ENGLAND COULD MISS OUT ON A TOP-4 BERTH

England are somehow lacking the right balance when it comes to the squad in general and resources available. Six pace-bowling options on the sub-continent in a 15-member squad sees them lack a top-order batter and another frontline spinner. England have also lost several ODI series of late and they have started poorly in the T20I series against India too. A tricky group also doesn't work in their favor.

TEAM ENGLAND'S GROUP STAGE FIXTURES (ALL MATCHES TO START AT 2:30PM IST)

22 February, Australia **v** England, Lahore, Pakistan
26 February, Afghanistan **v** England, Lahore, Pakistan
1 March, South Africa **v** England, Karachi, Pakistan ■

ICC CHAMPIONS TROPHY: CAN NEW ZEALAND LIGHT UP THE TOURNAMENT UNDER MITCHELL SANTNER?

New Zealand will be aiming to get things right and add a maiden piece of silverware to their ICC trophy cabinet in white-ball cricket. The 2021 ICC World Test Championship winners are heading into the tournament under the leadership of Mitchell Santner, who enjoyed a...

NEW ZEALAND
RAVINDRA
8

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

New Zealand will be aiming to get things right and add a maiden piece of silverware to their ICC trophy cabinet in white-ball cricket. The 2021 ICC World Test Championship winners are heading into the tournament under the leadership of Mitchell Santner, who enjoyed a successful stint in the ODI & T20I series at home against Sri Lanka. New Zealand have enjoyed decent runs in World Cup events of late, reaching the ODI World Cup final in 2019 and the semis in 2023. In T20Is, they were the semi-finalists in 2022 and the finalists in 2021. So the Black Caps have the habit of coming out all guns blazing in major tournaments. Coming to the Champions Trophy, New Zealand is placed in a crunch Group A, comprising India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. They would need to win at least two games to book a semi-final berth. New Zealand have a decent mix of players in their 15-member squad. New Zealand will promise to deliver a quality brand of cricket with the experience they possess.

The squad does feature some newcomers in terms of featuring in a maiden ICC event. The pace trio of Will O'Rourke, Ben Sears, and Nathan Smith are all set to play their maiden senior ICC event. Ahead of a crunch ICC Champions Trophy, here we analyze New Zealand's strengths, weaknesses, and team analysis.

NEW ZEALAND'S 15-MEMBER CHAMPIONS TROPHY SQUAD

Mitchell Santner (c), Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Devon Conway, Lockie Ferguson, Matt Henry, Tom Latham, Daryl Mitchell, Will O'Rourke, Glenn Phillips, Rachin Ravindra, Ben Sears, Nathan Smith, Kane Williamson, Will Young.

STRENGTHS OF NEW ZEALAND'S TEAM

The spin department of New Zealand can be celebrated. There is a good mix and variety in the ranks. Santner leads the spin unit with the likes of Michael Bracewell, Glenn Phillips and Rachin Ravindra all playing support. So you get 4 spin options in the squad. All four players are all-rounders. NZ are likely to field either two or three spin all-round options based on the opponents.

Santner owns 112 wickets in 110 ODIs with a healthy economy rate of 4.84. He can tie things down in the middle overs and give space to the others for a more aggressive role. Bracewell can be handy with some key overs here and there. He has picked 21 scalps from 23 matches at 37.52. Ravindra, too, can fill in when

needed. He owns 18 scalps in ODIs. Phillips, too, will play a vital role with his offerings. He has 13 wickets.

Matt Henry leads the pace attack in the absence of Trent Boult and the retired Tim Southee. Henry has really inflated his stocks as an all-format bowler. He has 150 wickets in 85 games at 25.43. Notably, he averages a healthy 21.94 in the death overs. A lot will rely on Henry's contribution. Lockie Ferguson is solid, but his place in the side is still not confirmed, given T20 commitments in leagues can see him get replaced. Jacob Duffy is a reserve player, and he should be the first choice, given the doubts lingering on Ferguson. Duffy averages 25.94 in ODIs. On the other hand, if Ferguson stays, it's a blessing. He owns 99 ODI wickets at 31.55.

New Zealand bat deep and have a crunch set of players to boost run-scoring. They have three openers in the ranks with the likes of Devon Conway, Will Young and Ravindra. One of them will be left on the bench. The inclusion of Ravindra here makes sense since he adds bowling depth. Conway averages 44-plus in ODIs with 1246 runs under his belt. Ravindra, who had a terrific ODI World Cup 2023 in India, is closing in on 1000 runs. He averages 41.08. His strike rate of 109-plus is a boost. Young is also a solid batter and has close to 1500 runs at 46.25. NZ's next set of batters adds more gloss. Kane Williamson comes as a natural entrant at number three. He boasts 6810 runs at 48.64, and his impact will be massive in terms of consistency. Meanwhile, Williamson has played six Champions Trophy matches across the 2013 and 2017 editions, amassing 345 runs at an impressive average of 69.00. The middle order has further depth. Mark Chapman, Tom Latham, and the dangerous Daryl Mitchell feature. Latham has over 4000 runs in ODIs from 149 matches. He averages 38.51 on Asian soil with 1271 runs under his belt. Mitchell can be New Zealand's match-winner. The star big-hitter averages over 50 in ODIs with six tons and 5 fifties under his belt. Phillips comes in at number 7. He averages over 31 in ODIs. Santner's availability at number 8 makes sure NZ bat deep. The southpaw owns 1392 runs in ODIs at 26-plus. On the bench, NZ have their bases covered. Young is the frontrunner in this regard. Michael Bracewell can bat in the lower middle order if needed

ICC MEN'S T20 WORLD CUP WEST INDIES & USA 2024
NEW ZEALAND

to come in for Phillips.

WEAKNESSES OF NZ IN THE CHAMPIONS TROPHY

New Zealand have most of their bases covered especially in batting, spin and two frontline pacers. However, the depth in the pace department is a concern. All-rounder Nathan Smith has question marks surrounding him. He averages 6.50 with the bat and an unhealthy 45.20 with the ball. William O'Rourke is promising. But he has just started his ODI career. He has 8 scalps from six matches. His inexperience could be found out. Meanwhile, Ben Sears is yet to make his ODI debut. There is inexperience riding here as well. Although, he has made an impression in T20Is.

PREDICTED STARTING XI OF THE NEW ZEALAND SIDE

Rachin Ravindra, Devon Conway, Kane Williamson, Tom Latham, Mark Chapman, Daryl Mitchell, Glenn Phillips, Mitchell Santner, Matt Henry, William O'Rourke, Lockie Ferguson.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Rachin Ravindra: The Indian-origin all-rounder had a defiant 2023 WC in India. He smashed 578 runs at 64.22. He smashed three tons and 2 fifties. Banking on that, the Chennai Super Kings player will be aiming to build upon the same. He now has good experience on Asian soil, having played the IPL with CSK.

NZ CAN BE PARTY SPOILERS

NZ will have a tough task to topple India and Pakistan and make it through to the semis. However, they have a serious chance of spoiling the fun for both these Asian giants by producing a stern display and getting past the line. NZ have a balanced side on offer. Not only do they bat deep, but they also have a mix of quality all-rounders and two sheer frontline pacers.

SCHEDULE OF NZ IN CHAMPIONS TROPHY

19 February - Pakistan **vs** New Zealand, Karachi
24 February - Bangladesh **vs** New Zealand, Rawalpindi
2 March - India **vs** New Zealand, Dubai ■

ICC CHAMPIONS TROPHY 2025: SPIRITED AFGHANISTAN COULD BE PARTY SPOILERS

The Afghanistan cricket team has reached new heights, and its performance in global ICC tournaments has seen drastic improvement. In the 2023 ODI World Cup in India, Afghanistan finished sixth ahead of England, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka...

ICC MEN'S CRICKET WORLD CUP INDIA 2023
AFGHANISTA
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AFGHANISTAN
SF
SF

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The Afghanistan cricket team has reached new heights, and its performance in global ICC tournaments has seen drastic improvement. In the 2023 ODI World Cup in India, Afghanistan finished sixth ahead of England, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. They won hearts with some gutsy performances. In the 2024 ICC T20 World Cup, Afghanistan progressed to the Super 8, where they overcame Australia and Bangladesh. The Afghans made it to the semis before bowing out. This was another positive direction for the Asian side.

Now, come the ICC Champions Trophy, Afghanistan will want to build from their performances in white-ball cricket and look to produce substance. Placed in Group B alongside Australia, England, and South Africa, the Afghans have a tough ask. However, they can come out strong and show intent to spoil the fun for these big sides. Afghanistan have that pedigree to make things interesting.

Hashmatullah Shahidi-led Afghanistan play their matches in Karachi and Lahore. Interestingly, the team is well suited to the demands of the sub-continent. As per ESPNcricinfo, Afghanistan have played 101 matches on Asian soil, winning 49 and losing 49 alongside one game getting tied (NR: 2).

Ahead of the global tournament, we present the strengths, weaknesses, and probable playing XI.

Afghanistan squad: Hashmatullah Shahidi (c), Ibrahim Zadran, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Sediqullah Atal, Rahmat Shah, Ikram Alikhil, Gulbadin Naib, Azmatullah Omarzai, Mohammad Nabi, Rashid Khan, AM Ghazanfar, Noor Ahmad, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Farid Malik, Naveed Zadran.

STRENGTHS OF AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan's opening combination of Ibrahim Zadran and Rahmanullah Gurbaz is a threat. The two batters are well-composed and often lay a strong foundation for the team to work on. Across 31 innings, Zadran and Gurbaz have added 1514 runs at a handsome 48. They own five 100-plus and three 50-plus partnerships in ODIs. Zadran averages 48 in ODIs, the highest for an Afghan batter (min 10-plus ODIs). Meanwhile, Gurbaz already owns the most 100s by an Aghan batter (8). Afghanistan's next set of batters are well drilled. Rahmat Shah boasts plenty of experience. He is the side's top scorer with 3869 runs at 35.17. Alongside skipper Shahidi. Rahmat has a solid understanding. The two batters own 1624 partnership runs at 47-plus from 37 innings. Shahidi has an impressive 2375 runs at 33.92. Rahmat owns close to 2500 runs in Asia (2475). Shahidi scored the bulk of his runs in Asia (1733).

Going further, there is a champion all-rounder in Azmatullah Omarzai. His value as a composed middle-order batter will boost Afghanistan. He owns 907 runs at 47.73, and his strike rate of close to 100 is impressive. Wicketkeeper batter Sediqullah Atal has done a fair job in his career, spanning six ODIs. He brings an element of freshness. Spin all-rounder Mohammad Nabi adds depth with the bat. He is the side's 2nd-highest scorer in ODIs. Nabi can be useful at the death. He strikes at 125.16 in this phase.

Afghanistan have a dream spin attack. Perhaps one of the tournament's best. Rashid Khan leads the line. He is a multi-talented three-dimensional player. Rashid is a pioneer in white-ball cricket and boasts match-winning skills. Rashid's understanding of the sub-continent will aid Afghanistan. He averages 19.53 (ER: 4.09) in this regard. Supporting Rashid will be the young Allah Ghazanfar. He has made rapid strides across the 11 games he has played, taking 21 scalps at 13.57 (ER: 4.05). Nabi, with his spin delights, will fill in as the third spinner. With 172 wickets, he is a cream customer. On the bench, Noor Ahmad lends his voice. Playing in the IPL and PSL has helped him. Still raw in ODIs, his exploits in T20s will give him the desired belief.

Afghanistan have a champion pacer in Fazalhaq Farooqi. He has gone from strength to strength. He owns 50 scalps at 31.78. With Omarzai in support, it helps Afghanistan. Besides these two, the likes of Farid Malik, Gulbadin Naib, and Naveed Zadran lend their support. It's a decent pace department, if not top-notch.

WEAKNESSES OF THE AFGHAN SIDE

Afghanistan are well stocked in their bowling and all-round departments. However, one area where they lack finesse is batting. The usual XI has a decent look and punch, but if they are to change things and bring versatility when things go wrong is an issue. The only recognized batter in the background is Ikram Alikhil. He averages a paltry 22-plus with three fifties from 22 innings Afghanistan need to be too reliant on their bowling for comfort. It will be a tough ask for the side

to chase big totals as they lack the zip. The pace attack is a bit lean in terms of pedigree. There is a lack of experience in ranks. A lot will ride on Farooqi and Omarzai in this regard.

PREDICTED STARTING XI OF AFGHANISTAN

Ibrahim Zadran, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Hashmatullah Shahidi, Rahmat Shah, Azmatullah Omarzai, Mohammad Nabi, Sediquallh Atal, Rashid Khan, AM Ghazanfar, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Farid Malik.

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Rashid Khan: The star attraction of white-ball cricket, Rashid Khan, is the match-winner Afghanistan will be counting upon. Across 104 innings with the ball, he currently owns 198 wickets at 19.87. His economy rate of 4.20 is a massive bonus. Rashid's 10 overs will be a pivotal factor for the Afghans. His credentials with the bat shouldn't be overlooked as well.

AFGHANISTAN WILL PROVIDE SPIRIT AND DETERMINATION

It looks really difficult for Afghanistan to reach the semis from what is a tough group. However, they can be party spoilers. A win here or there from the three matches can impact heavyweights Australia, England, and South Africa. One can also expect the Afghans to choke these teams with this spin show. This can be a turning point. One would feel this side will not come out empty-handed and perhaps provide some discomfort for their rivals, which may help them pick something.

SCHEDULE OF AFGHANISTAN IN THE CHAMPIONS TROPHY

21 Feb – Afghanistan **v** South Africa, National Stadium, Karachi
26 Feb – Afghanistan **v** England, Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore
28 Feb – Afghanistan **v** Australia, Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore ■

ICC CHAMPIONS TROPHY 2025: BANGLADESH HAVE A TOUGH ROAD AHEAD

Bangladesh face a tough task in the upcoming ICC Champions Trophy. The Tigers are placed in Group A alongside Pakistan, India and New Zealand. Led by Najmul Hossain Shanto, Bangladesh will open their Champions Trophy campaign against India in Dubai.

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Bangladesh face a tough task in the upcoming ICC Champions Trophy. The Tigers are placed in Group A alongside Pakistan, India and New Zealand. Led by Najmul Hossain Shanto, Bangladesh will open their Champions Trophy campaign against India in Dubai. Their next two games are set to be held in Pakistan. Can Bangladesh spring a surprise against the big teams? Well, going by their trend of late, this looks highly unlikely. If Bangladesh are to flex their muscles, they need their experienced figures to come good and deliver. The Bangladesh management made a big call earlier by removing veteran all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan from the team. Shakib, who is battling off-field issues, is suspended from bowling due to illegal action. The think tank made a bold call in not having him as a pure batter. Bangladesh's last outing in a major 50-over tournament saw them finish 8th in the ODI World Cup in India (2023). Since then, they played four bilateral ODI series, losing 2-1 to New Zealand away, winning 2-1 against Sri Lanka at home before losing to Afghanistan 2-1 in the UAE and 3-0 against West Indies in the Caribbean.

As per ESPNcricinfo, across 284 matches in Asia, Bangladesh have won 104 in addition to losing 174 (NR 6). Bangladesh have been dominated by the likes of India, Pakistan and New Zealand in ODIs. Each team has beaten the Tigers on 30-plus occasions.

Ahead of a cracking ICC Champions Trophy, here we present the strengths, weaknesses and analysis of Bangladesh's squad.

BANGLADESH SQUAD: Nazmul Hossain Shanto (c), Soumya Sarkar, Tanzid Hasan, Towhid Hridoy, Mushfiqur Rahim, Mahmudullah, Jaker Ali, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Rishad Hossain, Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur

Rahman, Parvez Hossai Emon, Nasum Ahmed, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Nahid Rana.

STRENGTHS OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh have an able pace attack with experienced figures in Mustafizur Rahman and Taskin Ahmed. Fizz leads the line with his left-arm pace. He is the Tigers' 4th-highest wicket-taker in ODIs with 172 scalps at 25.88. Notably, Fizz has 106 wickets in Asia at 23-plus and a strong economy rate of 4.79. His effectiveness at the death will be vital. In the last 10 overs, Fizz has claimed 72 wickets at just 16.15. Taskin will have a crack at opposition batters. In 77 matches, Taskin owns 109 wickets at just over 30. He owns a decent record in death overs, averaging 19.79. Bangladesh's spin all-rounder Mehidy Hasan Miraz is the side's trump card. In 103 ODIs, he owns 110 wickets at 36-plus and an ER of under 5. 73 of his wickets have come in Asia at 32.23. In overs between 11-40, Mehidy has 82 wickets under his belt at 36-plus. Melody's stock as a batter has risen of late. He owns 1599 runs from 74 innings at 25-plus. He has six fifties and two tons. Last year, he scored 305 runs from 8 innings with three fifties at 38.12. Mehidy is versatile and can bat anywhere in this line-up. In batting, usual performers Mahumudullah and Mushfiqur Rahman hold the key. With 5685 runs at 36-plus, Mahmudullah is a glue in this Bangladesh middle order. He owns 32 fifties and 4 hundreds. He has a decent record in Asia with 3321 runs under his belt. Mushfiqur is the side's best batter. He is closing in on 5000 runs in Asia (4931) and has a solid average of 36.52. Overall, the veteran batter has 7793 runs at 36.75. He is closing in on 50 fifties (49). Towhid Hridoy has been a constant feature for Bangladesh since his debut in 2023. He owns 877 runs from 29 innings at 33.73. These three will be crux performers for the side. At the top, Soumya Sarkar has decent exposure with 2198 runs from 75 matches. Skipper Shanto is closing in on 1500 runs in ODIs (1488). He averages 34.60 with 9 fifties and three tons. Jaker Ali seems a decent bet as a finisher. His strike rate reads 111-plus and he averages 50-plus from

five matches.

WEAKNESSES OF THE BANGLADESH SIDE

Bangladesh's support cast in the pace department lacks experience. Nahid Rana and Tandem Hasan Sakib have played 12 ODIs between them. They own a collective 17 wickets. Against top batters, the two could struggle to make an impact. Similarly, when it comes to spin, Bangladesh's attack besides Mehidy lacks flair. Rishad Hossain has played 7 matches, and he averages 60-plus with a poor economy rate of 6-plus. Nasum Ahmed averages 41-plus in ODIs and has gone wicketless in nine of the 17 innings he has bowled in. Bangladesh have backup batters in Parvez Hossain Emon and Tanzid Hasan. The former is yet to make his debut in ODIs. In 54 List A matches, he has over 1800 runs at 35.61. However, a lack of exposure to world-class bowling will make it difficult. With an average of just 20.65, top-order batter Tanzid lacks precision. Across 20 innings, he has crossed the 30-run mark 5 times.

PREDICTED STARTING XI OF BANGLADESH:

Soumya Sarkar, Najmul Hossain Shanto (c), Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Mushfiqur Rahim (wk), Towhid Hridoy, Mahmudullah, Jaker Ali, Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman, Rishad Hossain, Nasim Ahmed.

SHREY
BANGLADESH
SNG

PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Mehidy Hasan Miraz: The star attraction of this Bangladesh side is Mehidy. His exploits with bat and ball would aid Shanto's men. He can bat as a floater and he is someone who has improved drastically with his all-round skills. Being a key performer in both Tests and ODIs, Mehidy is key for the Tigers and will be one of the players to watch out for in the tournament.

BANGLADESH WILL FIND IT DIFFICULT TO COPE

It looks really difficult for Bangladesh to reach the semis from what is a tough group. They have a decent batting line-up, but their top order lacks bite. The onus will be on the middle-order batters to come out strong. Bangladesh's spin department and pace department are short, with a few standout names. Their bench strength is also on the weaker side. The absence of Shakib as an all-rounder is a major blow.

SCHEDULE OF BANGLADESH IN THE CHAMPIONS TROPHY

20 Feb – Bangladesh **v** India, Dubai International Cricket Stadium, Dubai
24 Feb – Bangladesh **v** New Zealand, Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium, Rawalpindi
27 Feb – Pakistan **v** Bangladesh, Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium, Rawalpindi ■

TOP 5 KNOCKS BY INDIA BATTERS IN CHAMPIONS TROPHY

The much-awaited Champions Trophy (CT) 2025 cricket tournament will kick off on February 19 with a game between Pakistan, co-hosts and defending champions, and New Zealand. The mega one-day international (ODI) contest has been in the headlines...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The much-awaited Champions Trophy (CT) 2025 cricket tournament will kick off on February 19 with a game between Pakistan, co-hosts and defending champions, and New Zealand. The mega one-day international (ODI) contest has been in the headlines for several controversies for months, and now the supporters are keenly awaiting an in-field start. India, who won the tournament in 2013 and were join winners in 2002, will be playing their matches in the United Arab Emirates since they have decided not to travel to Pakistan due to security reasons. Led by Rohit Sharma, India have been clubbed with Pakistan, Bangladesh and New Zealand in Group A and the top two point-getters will advance to the semi-finals. Group B has Australia, England, Afghanistan and South Africa. The semi-finals will be held in Dubai and Lahore on March 4 and 5, respectively. The final will be played in either Lahore or Dubai on March 9, depending on India's position. The high-voltage clash between arch-rivals India and Pakistan will also take place in Dubai on February 23.

The CT started in 1998 when Bangladesh hosted the inaugural edition. Till 2006, it was held regularly after every two years. Starting from the 2009 edition held in South Africa, it was held every four years till 2017. There were calls to scrap the tournament at a time, but it was decided later that the CT would be revived. Pakistan was initially announced as the sole host for the 2025 edition, but after India refused to travel there, the UAE was added as a neutral venue.

The CT has seen several memorable matches and top performances from both batters and bowlers. Indian players have also produced significant contributions. Here we take a look at the top five knocks by India batters in the tournament since 1998:

SACHIN TENDULKAR 141 AGAINST AUSTRALIA, DHAKA 1998

In the third quarterfinal match (this tournament started from quarterfinals with eight teams in the fray) played in Dhaka, Sachin Tendulkar played one of his best ODI knocks, his seventh in 1998, which was a highly productive year in his batting career. It was also his fourth against Australia the same year after the famous 'Desert Storm' in Sharjah. India, asked to bat first by Australia captain Steve Waugh, lost opener Sourav Ganguly and their skipper Mohammed Azharuddin early, and Rahul Dravid played a slow knock of 48 off 80 balls. But Tendulkar's 141 in 128 balls (13 fours, three sixes) overcompensated as it added 140 runs with Dravid and then 132 with Ajay Jadeja, who belted 71 in just 65 deliveries. Tendulkar fell in the 46th over when he was run out, perhaps the only way he could get out that day. The Indian cricketer came back after the break to take four wickets as well to decimate the backbone of the Australian batting order and they were all out for 263, losing by 44 runs. Tendulkar was selected as the player of the match.

YUVRAJ SINGH 84 AGAINST AUSTRALIA, NAIROBI 2000

Steve Waugh invited India to bat first once again in yet another CT quarterfinal, this time in Nairobi, Kenya. Tendulkar and Ganguly, the captain, gave their team a good start but India lost some quick wickets to get reduced to 90 for 3 in the 19th over. It was then when an 18-year-old Yuvraj Singh, who made his debut in the previous game against Kenya but got the opportunity to bat first in this game, appeared on the crease and counter-attacked. The southpaw held the innings together with a solid 84 in 80 balls (12 fours) as others rallied around him. India's tail wagged well and they finished on 265 for 9 in 50 overs. Yuvraj later pulled off a wonderful catch to send Ian Harvey back and effected a sensational direct-hit run-out of the dangerous Michael Bevan to tilt the game in India's favor. Australia were all out for 245 and India were once again in the CT semi-finals.

SOURAV GANGULY 141 NOT OUT AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA, NAIROBI 2000

Sourav Ganguly led from the front to belt a sublime knock of 141 in 142 balls against South Africa in the second semi-final of the 2000 edition of CT in Nairobi, Kenya. Electing to bat first after winning the toss, the left-handed opening batter remained not out to power his side to a total of 295 for 6 wickets in 50 overs. He received good support from Tendulkar (39), Dravid (58) and Yuvraj (41). Ganguly's innings against a formidable Proteas attack, including Allan Donald and Shaun Pollock, were studded with 11 fours and six sixes. The captain later returned to take South Africa's highest scorer, Mark Boucher (60), just when he was trying to resurrect the chase. The African side was all out for 200 in 41 overs, losing by 95 runs. Ganguly was chosen as the player of the match as India stormed into the final.

MOHAMMED KAIF 111 NOT OUT AGAINST ZIMBABWE, COLOMBO 2002

India won the toss and elected to bat against Zimbabwe in a group match at R Premadasa Stadium in Sri Lanka but like in that famous game in Tunbridge Wells in the 1983 World Cup, were rattled by the energetic opponents. Half of the Indian side was back into the hut with just 87 runs on board when Mohammed Kaif walked out at No.7. He added 117 runs with Dravid (71) for the sixth wicket and, after the wicket-keeper-batter fell, added another 84 runs with Anil Kumble who himself scored only 18 of those runs. Kaif remained not out on 111 from 112 balls, hitting eight fours and a six. The Zimbabweans tried hard but fell 14 runs short of the Indian total of 288 for 6, with Andy Flower scoring 145.

SHIKHAR DHAWAN 114 AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA, CARDIFF 2013

Shikhar Dhawan was an India opener who delivered on big stages, and the 2013 Champions Trophy was witness to that. In the first group match against South Africa in Cardiff, India led by Mahendra Singh Dhoni were asked to bat first, and the established opening pair of Rohit Sharma (65) and Dhawan (114) gave them a flying start. Their 127-run opening partnership gave the team a launching pad, and Dhoni (27) and Ravindra Jadeja (47) capitalized on that to take India’s total past 330. Dhawan took only 94 balls for his 114 and slammed 12 fours and a six. The Proteas had a few fifty-run knocks, including from Robin Peterson (68), captain Ab de Villiers (70), and Ryan McLaren (71 not out), but none of them really could be Dhawan-like knock to rescue them. South Africa finished on 305 and lost by 26 runs. India's opening batter was adjudged the player of the match and also the player of the series for his consistent runs throughout the tournament that India won.

THE NAIVETY OF INDIA'S CURRENT SELECTION COMMITTEE

The Indian men's national cricket team, under Ajit Agarkar's leadership as chairman of the selection committee, faces growing scrutiny. Despite the promising management structure, including Gautam Gambhir as head coach and a skilled coaching staff...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The Indian men's national cricket team, under Ajit Agarkar's leadership as chairman of the selection committee, faces growing scrutiny. Despite the promising management structure, including Gautam Gambhir as head coach and a skilled coaching staff, the selection committee's decisions reveal troubling patterns of favoritism, misjudgments, and a lack of strategic foresight.

LONGER ROPES FOR FAVORITES: AN UNFAIR TREND

A glaring issue with the current selection committee is the tendency to provide prolonged opportunities to select players, often at the expense of others who are more deserving. Players like Rishabh Pant and Shubman Gill have consistently been given longer ropes despite inconsistencies while emerging talents have been sidelined. For instance, although a promising player, Gill has struggled in critical games yet remains an undroppable figure in the squad. This approach disregards the concept of meritocracy, undermining the confidence of players who perform well in domestic and international games but are ignored. Nitish Kumar Reddy serves as a prime example. After blossoming during the 2024 Border-Gavaskar Trophy (BGT) and delivering standout performances, he seemed poised to cement his spot in the team. Instead, the selection committee inexplicably overlooked him, preferring to stick with their favorites.

GAUTAM GAMBHIR'S UNMET DEMANDS: A FRACTURED VISION

The discord between Gautam Gambhir and the selection committee has become a significant concern. Known for his bold leadership and strategic thinking, Gambhir has voiced frustration over how his input is disregarded in key decisions. His preference for Hardik Pandya as vice-captain—given Pandya's growing leadership potential and impact in shorter formats—was ignored, with Shubman Gill being appointed instead. Further, Gambhir suggested including Sanju Samson as the wicketkeeper for the 2025 Champions Trophy was dismissed despite Samson's consistent performances in limited-overs cricket. These decisions highlight a lack of synergy between the head coach and the selection committee, reflecting poorly on the team's overall management structure.

IMBALANCED SQUAD COMPOSITION: THE CASE OF FOUR SPIN-BOWLING ALL-

ROUNDERS

The lack of variety in India's squad for the 2025 Champions Trophy is another concerning decision. The selection committee chose four spin-bowling all-rounders—Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, and a fourth spinner—while compromising on the number of pacers. Although spin has traditionally been India's strength, this approach seems short-sighted, especially when conditions might demand a more balanced attack. Instead of including specialist pacers alongside spinners, the team now faces a lack of variety, raising questions about its ability to adapt to different match situations. The exclusion of pacers in favor of an over-reliance on spin reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the demands of modern ODI cricket, where balanced attacks have proven to be more successful.

POOR TEAM STRATEGY: MISGUIDED PRIORITIES

The selection committee's reluctance to adapt to evolving cricketing strategies is evident. The decision-making process seems stuck in a T20 mindset, where spinners are emphasized and balance is overlooked. This approach has underutilized the pace attack, often India's most lethal weapon in ICC tournaments. Players like Mohammed Shami and Jasprit Bumrah, recovering from injuries, needed support from a deeper pool of pacers. Instead, the committee has compromised the team's flexibility by reducing the number of options.

ADDRESSING THE CONCERNS

India's selection committee must be held accountable for its poor decisions. The team needs selectors who prioritize performance and adaptability over personal preferences. Key changes should include:

1. **Merit-Based Selections:** Reward players like Nitish Kumar Reddy, who have proven their worth,

instead of persisting with underperforming players.

2. Balanced Squad Composition:
Create a mix of pacers, spinners, and all-rounders tailored to specific tournament conditions.

3. Collaborative Decision-Making:
To ensure a unified strategy and foster better communication between the head coach and selectors. India's cricketing future depends on a selection process that prioritizes the team's success over individual biases. A cohesive approach is crucial for unlocking the team's full potential.

VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY: A FAILING YARDSTICK FOR ODI SELECTION

The selection committee's reliance on the Vijay Hazare Trophy as the benchmark for ODI selections has increasingly come under fire for its inconsistency. While the tournament is touted as the proving ground for aspiring cricketers, performances in the competition often fail to translate into national opportunities. A glaring example is Arun Nair, who scored over 750 runs in just eight innings during the latest edition of the Vijay Hazare Trophy. Despite this phenomenal run of form, he wasn't even considered for the backup squad or a spot in the ODI series. Such oversight renders the very purpose of the Vijay Hazare Trophy moot, as players performing exceptionally in domestic cricket are left in the lurch, questioning the fairness of the selection process. This trend must be the final straw for a system that has repeatedly failed to reward merit.

THE NEED FOR TRANSITION: ROHIT SHARMA AND VIRAT KOHLI

With Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli retiring from T20Is, the question of their continued dominance in the ODI setup has become increasingly relevant. While their contributions to Indian cricket are undeniable, their prolonged presence in the ODI format is now blocking the emergence of younger talents who could be groomed for the future. Players like Yashasvi Jaiswal, Ruturaj Gaikwad, and Tilak Varma have shown promise but face limited opportunities due to the stronghold of veterans. **A phased** transition, where experienced players pave the way for the next generation, is crucial for the team's long-term success. By holding on to their positions, Sharma and Kohli risk stalling India's progress, just as previous players faced similar stagnation due to a lack of opportunities.

AVOIDING ANOTHER AMOL MUZUMDAR: A LESSON FROM THE PAST

India's history has stories of players who never fully realized their potential due to limited opportunities. Manish Pandey, Mayank Agarwal, and Karun Nair, all of whom showed glimpses of brilliance in ODIs, were never given consistent chances to blossom into mainstays of the format. Despite their talent, these players became footnotes in Indian cricket history.

The parallels to Amol Muzumdar, one of the greatest players never to represent India despite a stellar domestic career, are stark and unsettling. The current system risks creating another generation of "what-could-have-been" players unless the selection committee adopts a forward-looking approach emphasizing nurturing young talent and providing sustained opportunities.

By addressing these systemic issues, Indian cricket can ensure that the next generation of stars isn't overshadowed by the legacy of the past but inspired to build their own. ■

REASONS WHY INDIA WERE OUTCLASSED IN THE BORDER-GAVASKAR TROPHY DOWN UNDER

India finally surrendered the Border-Gavaskar Trophy to Australia after a decade. The Indian cricket team lost the 5-match series Down Under by a 3-1 margin. This was despite them taking a 1-0 lead...

EASWARAN
28
RAHUL
1

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

India finally surrendered the Border-Gavaskar Trophy to Australia after a decade. The Indian cricket team lost the 5-match series Down Under by a 3-1 margin. This was despite them taking a 1-0 lead with a win in the first Test held at the Optus Stadium in Perth. With the series defeat, India's dream of making it to a 3rd ICC World Test Championship final on the bounce was over. South Africa and Australia will face each other in the final at Lord's in June 2025. India were abysmal in their last 8 Test matches, losing six of them, including a 3-0 defeat to New Zealand at home. A common theme in these defeats was abysmal batting and poor captaincy.

India were in the contest of the 5th Test match after gaining a 4-run lead. However, the dismal batting show in their 2nd innings and Jasprit Bumrah getting an injury killed all hopes. India lost the Test by six wickets at the SCG and failed to retain the Border Gavaskar Trophy for the first time since 2015.

Several things on and off the field prevented India from a hat-trick of series wins Down Under. Here we decode six top reasons why India were bruised and humiliated by the Aussies.

THE BATTING IS THE BIGGEST WORRY

Be it home or away, the last 8 Tests have given us glimpses of the Indian team failing to address poor quality with the bat. One wonders how, both at home and away, this side is short of confidence against spin and pace alike. Apart from the second innings of the first Test match in Perth, Indian batting hardly looked in any control. They offered little or no resistance. The Indian batting unit crossed the 300-run mark just twice out of the nine innings Down Under. India's scores in the series read 150, 487/6d, 180, 175, 260, 8/0, 369, 155, 181 and 162. India were always in a shell and right from the NZ series, the inability to go past 200 runs often in an innings, highlights a collective failure of mindsets.

The young Yashasvi Jaiswal (391 runs) and Nitish Kumar Reddy (298 runs) were the top two scorers for the visitors. Jaiswal, in particular, was the biggest positive. Reddy, who made his debut in this series, was consistent, barring the 5th Test, where he succumbed to poor shots. KL Rahul started well but lost control as the series progressed.

Rishabh Pant had a poor series largely due to T20 mode and bizarre shot selection at crucial junctures. One may argue he plays like that but where is the adaptability?

TEAM SELECTION AND FAVOURS

Several aspects of India's team selection went wrong

in this series. India had three specialist pacers in the first Test alongside a pace-bowling all-rounder in Nitish and a spin all-rounder in Washington Sundar. One felt some sort of a balance. As the series progressed, changes in personnel and favours hampered the progress. Come the 2nd Test in Adelaide which was a pink-ball affair, Rohit Sharma was included after he missed the first match. An opener, Rohit was traded to bat down the order to allow KL Rahul to keep his place as the opener. This misfired badly. Rohit, who came into the series with an awful run of form in the last 5 Tests versus Bangladesh and New Zealand, respectively, continued in the same vein. It was more of a favour done to him as he was a captain. He struggled both as a batter and a leader. Despite Rohit also taking his usual place as an opener later on, there was no respite. He was finally dropped for the 5th Test.

R Ashwin was brought back for the 2nd Test, leaving Sundar out. This move failed, too. Ashwin retired thereafter, and more issues crept in. In the 3rd Test, India fielded another new spin option in Ravindra Jadeja, leaving Sundar out. In the last two Tests, India played two spin options and four pace options, denting the balance further. There was no template. Also, India never handed specialists a chance in batting. Sarfaraz Khan was kept out for no fault of his own. Abhimanyu Easwaran was ignored despite him being the 3rd choice opener.

PACERS DIDN'T SUPPORT LEGEND BUMRAH

The difference between Australia and India was that the hosts relied on each other in the pace department and worked as a unit. Everyone was equally successful. India were forced to rely only on Jasprit Bumrah. If not for his brilliance, the side would have lost 5-0. Bumrah etched his name in the history books as he registered the best-ever performance by an Indian bowler in a Test series in Australia. The right-arm pacer finished as the highest wicket-taker across five Tests with 32 wickets from five matches (nine innings) at an average of 13.06 with three five-wicket hauls.

But where were the others? Mohammed Siraj wasn't at his best and looked too predictable at times. He had the costliest economy rate among the top five wicket-takers in the tourney. Siraj picked 20 wickets from five matches at an average of 31.15. India's other support cast in pace faltered. Harshit Rana showed he needs more experience and work to be considered a Test bowler. His pace was an issue, and he leaked runs. Nitish needed more overs and a clear plan. Akash Deep didn't do justice across the two Tests he played. Prasidh Krishna was hardly utilised and got one game. He picked six wickets in that contest. India didn't take advantage of his height and pace.

ROHIT AND KOHLI HAVE LOST THEIR WAY

Rohit and Virat Kohli, being the senior figures, relied on emotion and favours from the management to keep their places for a while now in the Test side. What it does is that it robs Team India of playing performers in domestic cricket or even including players in the squad to build them for the road ahead. Kohli, at 36, has been a pale shadow of himself for the last few years in Tests. Rohit's time is up. At 37, he looks outdated. Both players are more ego than substance. They won't play domestic cricket or County cricket, but knowing stature can help them seal berths.

Their pattern of dismissals and failing to work on them is a worry. Barring a ton (100*), Kohli scored just 90 runs from his remaining 8 innings. He averaged 23.75 in the series. Rohit averaged 6.20 from 5 outings. They collectively failed against New Zealand as well. Kohli's average dip since 2021 tells you the lack of confidence he has been dealing with in red-ball cricket. Ranji Trophy matches played by him during this period is 0.

Rohit was often seen going into ultra-defensive mode as a captain. Often, the skipper played the waiting game, allowing Australia to make a comeback. India missed the aggression of Bumrah as skipper in the three Tests in between.

THE GAMBHIR-LED MANAGEMENT IS TIMID

Since Gautam Gambhir replaced Rahul Dravid as the head coach, India have fallen behind. Gambhir lacks the edge which Ravi Shastri and Dravid brought. One wonders what Gambhir brought as India repeated the same mistakes as seen in the New Zealand series at home. India's frequent team changes, lack of balance in the side, and abysmal batting are the main factors robbing them of putting up quality cricket. Kohli has consistently fallen to the corridor of uncertainty, edging balls he could have left. One wonders, what has Gambhir and Abhishek Nayar done to address that loophole. Several reports claim Gambhir has failed to communicate properly. Moreover, off-field issues like team leaks and uncertainty in the dressing room did a lot of harm. Gambhir has the personnel he demanded but the management looks clueless with a lack of identity.

CONCLUSION

Team India needs to start afresh for the 2025-27 edition of the WTC. And if they are to win this tournament, they have to move away from Rohit and Kohli. The selectors need to identify consistent performers in domestic cricket and build a side from there. Test players need to be freed from white-ball cricket, given India now has a big pool of players to play the 50 and 20-over formats. The Test team probably needs to follow a direction where they indulge in domestic and county cricket to better themselves in both home and away matches. Lastly, Gambhir needs to build the side around Jaiswal, Nitish and Bumrah. ■

BORDER-GAVASKAR TROPHY 2024-25: INDIA PLAYERS' REPORT CARD

India saw the Border-Gavaskar Trophy (BGT) 2024-25 slipping out of their hands after a decade in the just-concluded tour of Australia as the hosts came from behind to defeat them 3-1 in a five-match series...

BY SHIUBAM GHOSH

India saw the Border-Gavaskar Trophy (BGT) 2024-25 slipping out of their hands after a decade in the just-concluded tour of Australia as the hosts came from behind to defeat them 3-1 in a five-match series. The Asian side started well with an emphatic 295-run win in Perth, but Australia came back strongly to win the second, fourth, and fifth matches in Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney. The third match in Brisbane was drawn due to rain.

The series was one fraught with controversies, especially for India, who failed to get their act together in the final four matches. There were serious issues with the form of some prime batters, including captain Rohit Sharma, who sat out for the final match. At the same time, the bowling looked too dependent on Jasprit Bumrah, who had a dream run with the ball with 32 scalps at an incredible average of 13.

Here, we take a look at the performance of each member of the Indian squad that was picked for the all-important BGT 2024-25 squandering, which meant the Asian team was out of the race for the World Test Championship 2025 final.

We rate the players who got games out of a scale of 10.

ROHIT SHARMA: 1 OUT OF 10

The India captain had one of the worst series of his career, with just 31 runs in five innings at a pathetic average of 6.20. He was dismissed four times by his opposite number, Pat Cummins. While Sharma tried to put up a brave face during the final game, which he claimed to have given a miss, saying nobody could decide for him, there is no denying that he has clearly looked clueless in the red-ball format recently, both at home and abroad. The single point he gets is because of some catches he took in the slip.

JASPRIT BUMRAH: 9 OUT OF 10

The Indian vice-captain, who captained the side in two matches, both in the absence and presence of Sharma, was the brightest performer for his team this BGT 2024-25. He made the Australian top order look brittle and forced the home team to bring in a teen hitter to unsettle him. But Bumrah, being Bumrah, was unstoppable. In nine innings in five matches, he picked 32 wickets, the most by an Indian bowler in Australia in a series, and failed to turn up in the final innings of the fifth match when India still had a chance to draw the series due to an injury. His 'Player of the Series' award was the visitor's only saving grace.

VIRAT KOHLI: 2 OUT OF 10

For Virat Kohli, this series would remain as tainted as the 2014 one in England. The ace batter had made sure to deliver both as the captain and the batter in his past tours Down Under, but this time, the 36-year-old only edged and sledged. His identical dismissals every time he went out to bat spoke volumes about glaring errors in technique, and the frustration he showed after his final dismissal in Sydney summed up his plight. Kohli scored 190 runs in nine innings at an average of 23.75 and that included an unbeaten and record-breaking century in Perth.

YASHASVI JAISWAL: 7 OUT 10

The southpaw was the best India's batting could

produce this series, as he ended up as the top scorer for his side with 391 runs in 10 innings at an average of 43.44. The Indian fans remained interested as long as Jaiswal batted, and each time he got out, the hopes faded. However, one would have expected Jaiswal to score more runs after the 161 he slammed in Perth. He made a couple of 80s in Melbourne but got out, unfortunately, on both occasions. Jaiswal, however, showed that he is not afraid to take on bowlers Down Under and could be more dominant when he tours Australia again. Jaiswal also took some brilliant catches while dropping a few in Melbourne.

KL RAHUL: 5 OUT OF 10

KL Rahul faced all sorts of criticism before reaching Australia, and even during some practice games, but in the Test series, he showed his quality. He finished among the top five scorers with 276 runs in 10 innings at an average of 30.66. His double-hundred partnership with Jaiswal in Perth was one of the top moments in India's otherwise dull performance with the bat. Both his half-centuries in the series were well-crafted but India would have loved to see his bat producing more runs as he got out on a few occasions after getting set. Rahul's catching in the slips was commendable.

RISHABH PANT: 6 OUT OF 10

The wicket-keeper-batter blew hot and cold in the series with the bat and was also blasted by former players like Sunil Gavaskar after getting out playing adventurous shots in Melbourne, but there is no debate that Rishabh Pant scores best with his natural belligerent style. Pant made 255 runs in five matches and nine innings at an average of 28.33. His best score was 61, which came in the final innings in Sydney and

looked promising after all the hits his body took in the first innings. But Pant's irresponsible approach in the Melbourne Test earned him brickbats. Behind the wickets, Pant took some great catches.

NITISH KUMAR REDDY: 7 OUT OF 10

Nitish Kumar Reddy was certainly one of the finds for India in BGT 2024-25. Playing in his debut Test series, the 21-year-old batter-all-rounder accumulated 298 runs in five matches at an average of 37.25 with a gritty hundred at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. He ended up as the fourth-highest scorer in the series. In bowling, however, he was less effective and picked only five at an average of 38.

MOHAMMED SIRAJ: 3 OUT OF 10

Mohammed Siraj was criticized at times but he managed to play all the matches and finished with 20 scalps, the second-best Indian bowler after Bumrah. Siraj, however, went for some runs and averaged more than 31. His 0-122 in 23 overs in the first innings in Melbourne particularly came under the scanner. Siraj was expected to play a bigger role in the absence of Bumrah as the next senior-most bowler, but he failed to rise to the occasion.

SHUBMAN GILL: 1 OUT OF 10

Shubman Gill is often dubbed as the next big thing in Indian cricket, but he did no justice to his reputation. The team banked on him after he made an impressive debut in Australia during the 2020-21 series, but he continued to fail in the all-important No.3 position. In five innings in three matches, the right-handed batter could make only 93 runs at an average of 18.60, with the highest score of 31. He got out cheaply after getting some starts, putting his team

in more trouble. Gill needs to do some serious introspection into his red-ball batting skills.

RAVINDRA JADEJA: 1 OUT OF 10

The veteran batter-all-rounder was another poor performer in the series. The left-arm spinner was virtually non-existent, with four wickets in three matches, and with the bat, he scored 135 runs in five innings at an average of 27 with the highest score of 77. For an experienced all-rounder like Jadeja, who has more than 3,300 runs and 323 wickets in the long format, the performance in BGT 2024-25 was below average.

RAVICHANDRAN ASHWIN: 1 OUT OF 10

Ravichandran Ashwin took retirement from international cricket after the third Test in Brisbane, which he did not play. While the decision gave birth to speculations, the veteran off-spinner could not do much in the only Test that he played, which was the day-night game in Adelaide. He got a solitary wicket (Mitchell Marsh) even which was controversial. It was a disappointing end for somebody with more than 530 Test wickets, but that's how cricket is. Cruel.

WASHINGTON SUNDAR: 1 OUT OF 10

Washington Sundar played three matches in the series but couldn't do much apart from scoring a fighting fifty in Melbourne to bring India back into the game. He made 114 runs in six innings at an average of 22.80 and picked only three wickets at an average of 38.66.

PRASIDH KRISHNA: 4 OUT OF 10

Prasidh Krishna played the final match of the series in Sydney and produced quite a surprising show with

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six wickets at an average of 17.83. Playing in just his third Test replacing an injured Akash Deep, the right-arm bowler chipped in in the absence of Bumrah to restrict Australia in the first innings (3 for 42) and backed it up with an impressive show in the second to pick three quick wickets again.

AKASH DEEP: 1 OUT OF 10

Akash Deep replaced Harshit Rana in the third Test in Brisbane, and more than his bowling, it was his 31 with the bat that helped India more by saving the follow-on. He played the fourth match in Melbourne but could not impress, taking only two wickets and scoring seven runs. The right-arm fast bowler took five wickets in two matches at an average of 54. He missed the fifth match due to injury.

HARSHIT RANA: 1 OUT OF 10

Harshit Rana made an impressive debut in Perth with four wickets, including three in the first innings, but his lacklustre show in the second Test, in which he fell for a pair and went wicketless, meant he did not get another game in the series. Rana bowled at an average of 50.75.

DHRUV JUREL: 0 OUT OF 10

Dhruv Jurel played the first match in Perth, which India won, but his contribution was not much. Having played as a specialist batter, he scored 12 runs in the Test, his first in Australia, averaging only six.

DEVDUTT PADIKKAL: 0 OUT OF 10

Devdutt Padikkal also played the game in Perth and made 25 runs, all of which came in the second innings. He averaged 12.50. bhimanyu Easwaran, Sarfaraz Khan, and Tanush Kotian did not play any match. ■

TOP STORIES

“Discrimination of any kind, either in stadiums or online, will not be tolerated”

- Man City on Khadija Bunny Shaw not travelling to Arsenal

“The team needs him, he has quality, enormous experience, enormous personality and he is an undisputed leader”

- Monterrey on signing Sergio Ramos

COCO GAUFF DONATES $100,000 FOR A SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Tennis star Coco Gauff donated $100,000 to UNCF to provide scholarships for students playing competitive tennis at historically Black colleges and universities. UNCF will administer the Coco Gauff Scholarship Program. “My family has a deep-rooted history with HBCUs, going all the way back to my great-great-grandfather. From aunts and uncles to cousins, HBCUs have played a huge role in shaping who we are," Gauff said. “Supporting UNCF in creating opportunities for student-athletes in tennis means a lot to me. As a young Black athlete, I understand how impactful it is to see people who look like me thriving in both sports and education.” Gauff, a 20-year-old from Florida, won the 2023 U.S. Open singles championship and the 2024 French Open women's doubles title. She is currently No. 3 in the WTA rankings.

SIMONA HALEP ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT

Two-time Grand Slam champion Simona Halep announced her retirement from tennis at age 33 after a first-round loss at a tournament in her home country of Romania, ending an injury-filled comeback from a doping suspension. “I don’t know if it’s with sadness or joy — I think I’m feeling both — but my soul is at peace with this decision, and I’ve always been realistic with myself. My body can no longer handle as much as it used to, to get me where I probably once was," Halep said, using a microphone to address the crowd in Cluj, Romania, following her 6-1, 6-1 loss to Lucia Bronzetti in the Transylvania Open. It was the first match of the year for Halep, who reached No. 1 in the WTA rankings for the first time in 2017 but is now 870th and was given a wild-card invitation to play in Romania. She also was a three-time runner-up at Grand Slam tournaments.

MARCELO BID ADIEU

Marcelo, Real Madrid's incredibly famous for his big hair and being one of the most decorated players in soccer history, announced his retirement at 36. “My journey as a player ends here, but I still have so much to give to football. Thank you for everything," the Brazilian said in a video on X. A defender who excelled in attack, Marcelo had one of the most trophy-filled careers in soccer history thanks to his time at Madrid from 2007-22 and his return to his boyhood Brazilian club, Fluminense, from 2023-24. He also played for Brazil at the World Cup in 2014 and ’18 and won Olympic medals in 2008 (bronze) and 2012 (silver). At Madrid, he won the Champions League five times, the Spanish League six times, and 25 titles in total.

LA LIGA PRESIDENT SLAMS REAL MADRID

Spanish league president Javier Tebas lashed out at Real Madrid, saying the club leadership has “lost its mind” for accusing Spain's referees of being biased against the defending champion. The head of La Liga said it was considering legal action over Madrid's letter, which accused the league of being “adulterated” to favor other clubs. Tebas told reporters, “They have built up an exaggerated tale of victimization that is completely baseless with, in my opinion, the goal of undermining the competition. It is completely over the top. They have lost their minds.” The letter was sent two days after Madrid felt hurt by alleged refereeing mistakes in a 1-0 loss at Espanyol. Madrid mostly complained of Espanyol defender Carlos Romero's hard foul on Kylian Mbappé in the 60th minute. Romero was shown a yellow card, but Madrid felt he should have been sent off with a straight red card. Romero went on to score the winner.

CHELSEA STRIKER DENIES INSULTING REMARK

Chelsea striker Sam Kerr denied that calling a police officer “white” was used as an insult as she was cross-examined in her trial on a charge of racially aggravated harassment. Kerr, also the Australia captain, spoke on the fourth day of the trial at Kingston Crown Court following an incident in London on Jan. 30, 2023. It is alleged that Kerr and her partner, West Ham midfielder Kristie Mewis, had been out drinking when they were driven to the police station by a taxi driver, who complained that they refused to pay clean-up costs after one of them was sick and that one of them smashed the vehicle’s rear window. Kerr, who said she feared for her life as she felt “trapped” during the taxi ride, is alleged to have become abusive and insulting toward police constable Stephen Lovell at the police station, calling him “stupid and white.” Kerr has accepted making the comments but denies that they amount to the charge.

NICK TAYLOR WINS ANOTHER PLAYOFF IN THE SONY OPEN

Nick Taylor in a playoff is tough to beat. Getting there was the hardest part for the Canadian, who delivered another highlight reel of clutch moments in the Sony Open. Down to his last shot, Taylor chipped in from 60 feet for an eagle on the par-5 closing hole at...

BY STAFF WRITER

Nick Taylor in a playoff is tough to beat. Getting there was the hardest part for the Canadian, who delivered another highlight reel of clutch moments in the Sony Open. Down to his last shot, Taylor chipped in from 60 feet for an eagle on the par-5 closing hole at Waialae for a 5-under 65 to get into a playoff with Nico Echavarria. He holed a 10-foot birdie putt on the first extra hole. And then he hit a wedge from 46 yards that was close to perfect to set up a 3-foot birdie putt for the win. The last shot might have been the easiest shot he had in the final hour. “I'm a bit stunned this worked out this way,” Taylor said.

That was true for so many others, starting with Echavarria, the 30-year-old Chilean who delivered some big moments of his own with a 15-foot par save, a 12-foot birdie, and twice getting up-and-down from the bunker at the end for a 65 to join Taylor at 16-under 264.

Behind them were Stephan Jaeger and J.J. Spaun, and the Sony Open looked to come down to them along the back nine until Jaeger piped a drive out-of-bounds on the 16th, and Spaun bogeyed from a bunker on the 17th. Both failed to birdie the par-5 18th to join the playoff. Echavarria was surprised it was only a two-man playoff. “If Nick doesn't chip in, I win the tournament,” he said.

Echavarria didn't miss a beat in his bid for a third straight year with a PGA Tour title. The bunker shot on the 18th was creative and bold for a tap-in birdie. On the 18th in the first playoff hole, his second shot looked to be about 20 feet away on the fringe for an eagle putt when the wind nudged it down the hill into the rough,

forcing him to get up and down. He had 40 feet on the collar for an eagle on the second playoff hole at No. 18, and the first putt came out soft and was 7 feet short. He missed the birdie putt to extend the playoff.

"I misjudged the lag putt on the last hole. I didn't think it was going to be that slow. Didn't consider the wind," Echavarria said. "The wind kind of held it and my lag putting today was a little off, which is a strength of mine. But, I mean, just one bad putt can't define a great week."

Taylor never looked like a winner — especially after missing a pair of 4-foot birdie putts on the 15th and 16th holes — until he had a lei around his neck and the trophy in his hand. It was his fifth PGA Tour title, the last three in a playoff. He beat Charley Hoffman in Phoenix last year with clutch putting in a playoff. And it was the Canadian Open in 2023 when Taylor famously holed that 70-foot eagle putt to win his national open before a delirious, rain-soaked crowd.

The victory sends Taylor to the Masters again, a big perk after a dismal end to last season. He moved back to No. 29 in the world and will be in all the signature events this year. None of this seemed possible when he was two behind with two to play, coming off two short misses.

"It was just one of those where you try to go until they don't let you play anymore," Taylor said. "I was 1 over through seven; get on a birdie streak there. It's always so bunched here, but I did a really good job every day,

really, of just hanging in there.

“Fortunate for me, really good things happened at the end.” Jaeger and Spaun both left Waialae with plenty of regrets. From the time they made the turn, it looked like a duel between them to decide the winner, and they put on a great show until the final three holes. Jaeger holed a 30-foot birdie putt on the 14th to catch Spaun, who then followed by making a par putt from just inside 30 feet to stay tied for the lead.

Jaeger didn't hit a fairway on the back nine except for an iron off the 15th tee, and it finally caught up with him at the end. He hit the driver to cut off the dogleg on the 16th, but it went so far left that it was never found, presumed to be out-of-bounds.
“The one on 16 I would like to have back. Wrong hole to hit that shot,” Jaeger said. Jaeger did well to make a bogey off a provisional ball to stay only one behind — Spaun missed a 10-foot birdie putt that would have given him a cushion. And then Spaun made a bogey from the bunker on the 17th. All the while, Echavarria and Taylor rallied in improbable ways. Jaeger and Spaun needed a birdie on the par-5 closing hole to join the playoff. Jaeger hit 3-wood off the tee and didn't clear the bunker, and his second shot hit the lip and left him in the rough some 178 yards away. He went over the green and made par for a 67.

Spaun from the 18th fairway missed to the right, the worst place to be because the pin was cut to the right with the wind at his back. He did well to get it to 10 feet, and then missed the birdie putt and shot 68 ■

BARCELONA ROUTS REAL MADRID AGAIN TO WIN SPANISH SUPER CUP

Real Madrid came out looking for some payback in the latest "Clasico" against Barcelona but ended up being embarrassed again. Madrid lost 5-2 to Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup final in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

SUPERCOPA
DE ESPAÑA
FERMÍN
16

BY STAFF WRITER

Real Madrid came out looking for some payback in the latest “Clasico” against Barcelona but ended up being embarrassed again. Madrid lost 5-2 to Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup final in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. That followed a 4-0 loss at home to Barcelona in the Spanish league in October. Kylian Mbappé put Madrid ahead early in his second Clasico, but Barcelona then ran away with goals by Lamine Yamal, Robert Lewandowski, Raphinha — who scored twice — and Alejandro Balde.

Rodrygo scored for Madrid on the hour mark after Barcelona goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny was sent off early in the second half. It was the third straight win for Barcelona in 2025 after it lost two games in a row to end last year. “The Christmas break helped us reflect on what we had done wrong,” Lewandowski said. “Now we can look forward to the run of games that we have until the end of the season.”

Madrid lost for the first time after a run of five consecutive victories. “It was a bad night,” Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. “It's a disappointment, we won't hide it, but it's soccer ... you have to try to learn from the losses. We have to look forward to what's ahead.”

Mbappé had been contained when the rivals met in October but scored a superb goal five minutes into the match at King Abdullah Sports City stadium after picking up the ball just inside Madrid's half, running at the defense, and then finding the net with a clever finish. But Yamal evened the match with a nice run in the 22nd, and Lewandowski, who scored twice in the earlier clasico, put the Catalans ahead in the 36th.

Raphinha added goals in the 39th and 48th minutes, while Balde scored in first-half stoppage time. Rodrygo scored from a free kick in the 60th after Szczesny was sent off for a foul outside the area to stop a breakaway. Lewandowski has 26 goals in 27 appearances across all competitions for Barcelona, while Raphinha has scored 19 times and Yamal eight.

Barcelona was able to count on Spain midfielder Dani Olmo after the Spanish government stepped in to allow the club to register him with the league provisionally. The final came after Mallorca fans said they were harassed by local men who support Madrid after Thursday’s semifinal. Two wives of Mallorca players said they were groped. The Spanish Super Cup has become a moneymaker for the federation and competing clubs since the federation struck a deal in 2019 to hold it in Saudi Arabia. ■

TYSON FURY ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT FROM BOXING

British heavyweight Tyson Fury has retired from boxing — again — one month after losing a rematch with Ukrainian Oleksandr Usyk. The 36-year-old Fury announced the decision in a short video posted on his Instagram account, which included a cryptic message.

BY STAFF WRITER

British heavyweight Tyson Fury has retired from boxing — again — one month after losing a rematch with Ukrainian Oleksandr Usyk. The 36-year-old Fury announced the decision in a short video posted on his Instagram account, which included a cryptic message.

“Hi everybody, I'm going to make this short and sweet. I'd like to announce my retirement from boxing,” Fury said. “It's been a blast, I've loved every single minute of it, and I'm going to end with this: Dick Turpin wore a mask. God bless everybody, see you on the other side.” It was unclear why Fury made a reference to Turpin, a famed 18th-century English highway robber and horse thief.

Fury was upset with the unanimous decision when he lost the Dec. 21 rematch with Usyk in Saudi Arabia. However, Usyk landed 179 of 423 punches thrown (42%), while Fury landed 144 of his 509 punches, a 28% clip. Fury had acknowledged making mistakes, notably by showboating too much, when losing their first fight in Riyadh in May by a split decision.

British boxing fans had been hoping that Fury would next fight countryman Anthony Joshua, a bout that has been talked about for years but now looks unlikely to happen. Fury has announced his retirement before, however, notably on his 34th birthday in August 2022.

But he was back fighting again two months later. In April of that same year, the self-styled “Gypsy King” had already suggested he would retire earlier after knocking out Dillian Whyte with a brutal uppercut in front of more than 94,000 fans at Wembley Stadium. But he never did and won two more fights against Derek Chisora and Francis Ngannou — an MMA fighter making his boxing debut — before finally meeting his match in Usyk. Fury’s record is 34-2-1, with 24 KOs.

The losses to Usyk were the only defeats in Fury's career, which began in 2008 and included one draw against American boxer Deontay Wilder in 2018. After winning Ring magazine's Male Fighter of the Year award recently, Usyk thanked Fury in his own humorous way. The two became friends and spoke of their mutual respect.

"My friend, greedy belly, thank you so much; you (are) great my opponent,” Usyk said, raising a clenched right fist. Boxing promoter Frank Warren, who worked with Fury, told the BBC that he had not spoken to Fury prior to his retirement announcement.

“If that's what he wants to do, that’s great. He’s done everything he can do. Probably been the best British heavyweight of his generation by far," Warren told BBC radio. "Two-time world champion, two closely fought fights against Usyk. He’s got plenty of money, got his wits about him, got a lovely family." ■

FEATURE

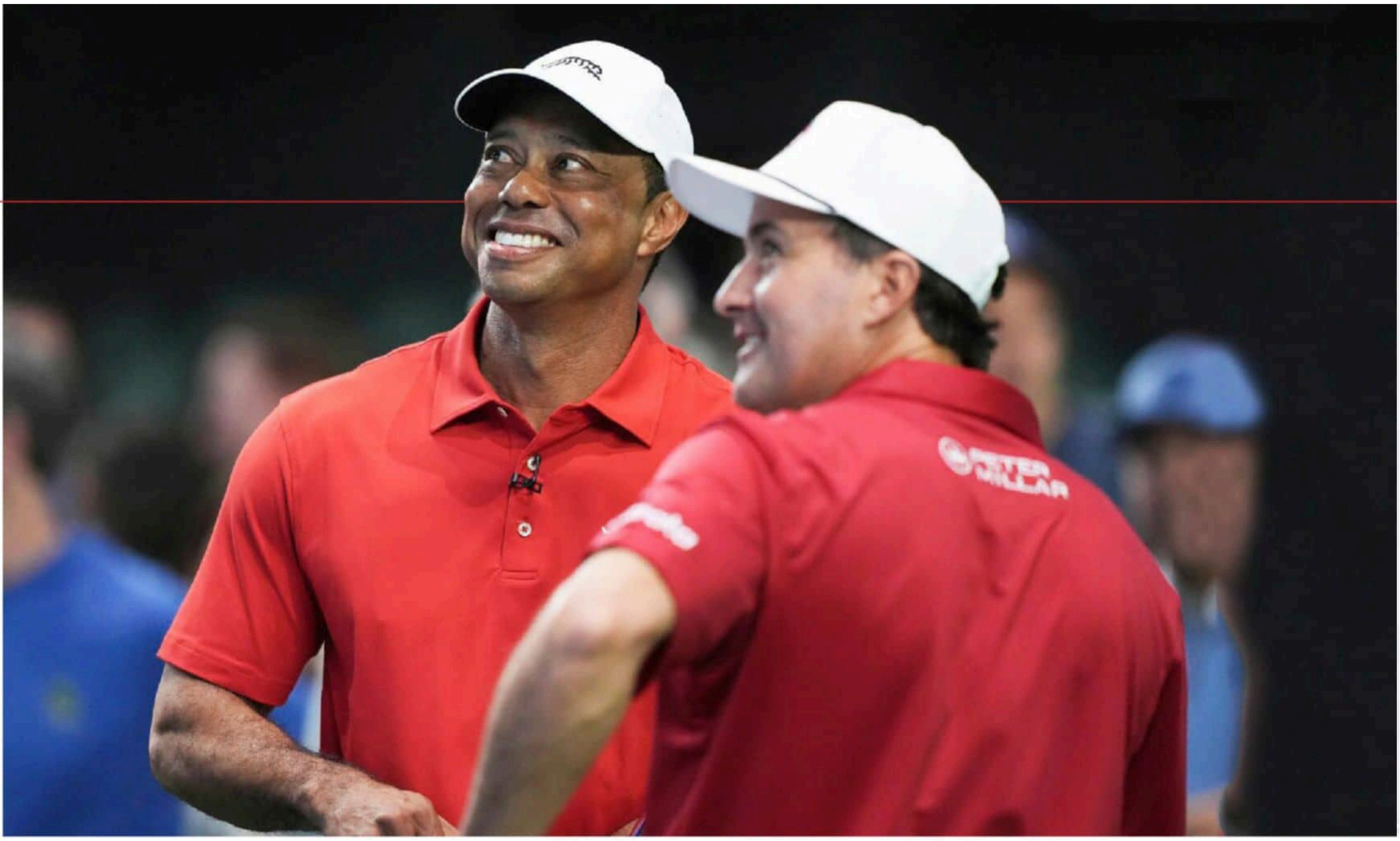
TIGER WOODS MAKES INDOOR GOLF DEBUT

Tiger Woods was the sixth and final player to emerge from the tunnel and onto the field of play for his TGL debut. No one announced his name. Wasn't necessary. Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" blared and that was more than enough of an introduction for perhaps golf's...

BY STAFF WRITER

Tiger Woods was the sixth and final player to emerge from the tunnel and onto the field of play for his TGL debut. No one announced his name. Wasn't necessary. Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" blared and that was more than enough of an introduction for perhaps golf's greatest player ever. It's not like anyone inside SoFi Center at Palm Beach State College didn't know who Woods was, and most were even probably aware of how he, Rory McIlroy and others spent years trying to make this notion of indoor golf on TV happen. "It is a reality now," Woods said.

Week 2 of TGL was Tuesday night — Woods joined



Kevin Kisner and Max Homa of Jupiter Links Golf Club to take on the Los Angeles Golf Club of Justin Rose, Collin Morikawa and Sahith Theegala. The final score: Los Angeles 12, Jupiter 1 in the 15-hole, made-for-TV team match featuring nine holes of alternate shot triples play, followed by six holes of singles play — two holes for each player on each team. Woods was smiling throughout, even with the lopsided score. The format is such that he only took 20 shots over the course of the match, which lasted just over two hours.

“We were entertaining," Woods said, still laughing even after the rout ended inside the arena built just a few miles from his Jupiter Island home. “We hit a lot of shots. I think the people there got to see how bad pros can be. It was just a boat race, oh my goodness. But we had a great time.”

Woods' team got on the wrong side of the scoreboard quickly, falling behind 5-0. It could have been worse if Woods hadn't made an 8-footer for par to help his team get a tie on the fifth hole. That putt came one hole after Woods slid a 7-footer wide to the left. “It's about time, Tiger,” tennis legend Serena Williams said on the ESPN broadcast. Williams is a longtime friend of Woods, so she found herself rooting for him — and she is part of the ownership group of the Los Angeles Golf Club, so she found herself simultaneously rooting against him.

There were vintage Woods moments, like staring down shots he liked as the super-high-tech video boards told the tale of where the ball would have gone outdoors. There were also frustrating ones; he shook his head after he sent a 101-yard wedge into the water on the second hole of the 15-hole match — as son Charlie, sitting in one of the seats in the arena overlooking the course, couldn't help but laugh.

“This is unique. This is something that golf has never seen before," Woods said. “You have an arena like this and you out there with great guys, entertain everyone, just have fun." It wasn't just Charlie Woods chuckling at Jupiter Links' play. Tiger Woods was as well — especially when Kisner bladed a shot from the sand, sent it ricocheting off the pin as his teammates ducked for cover.

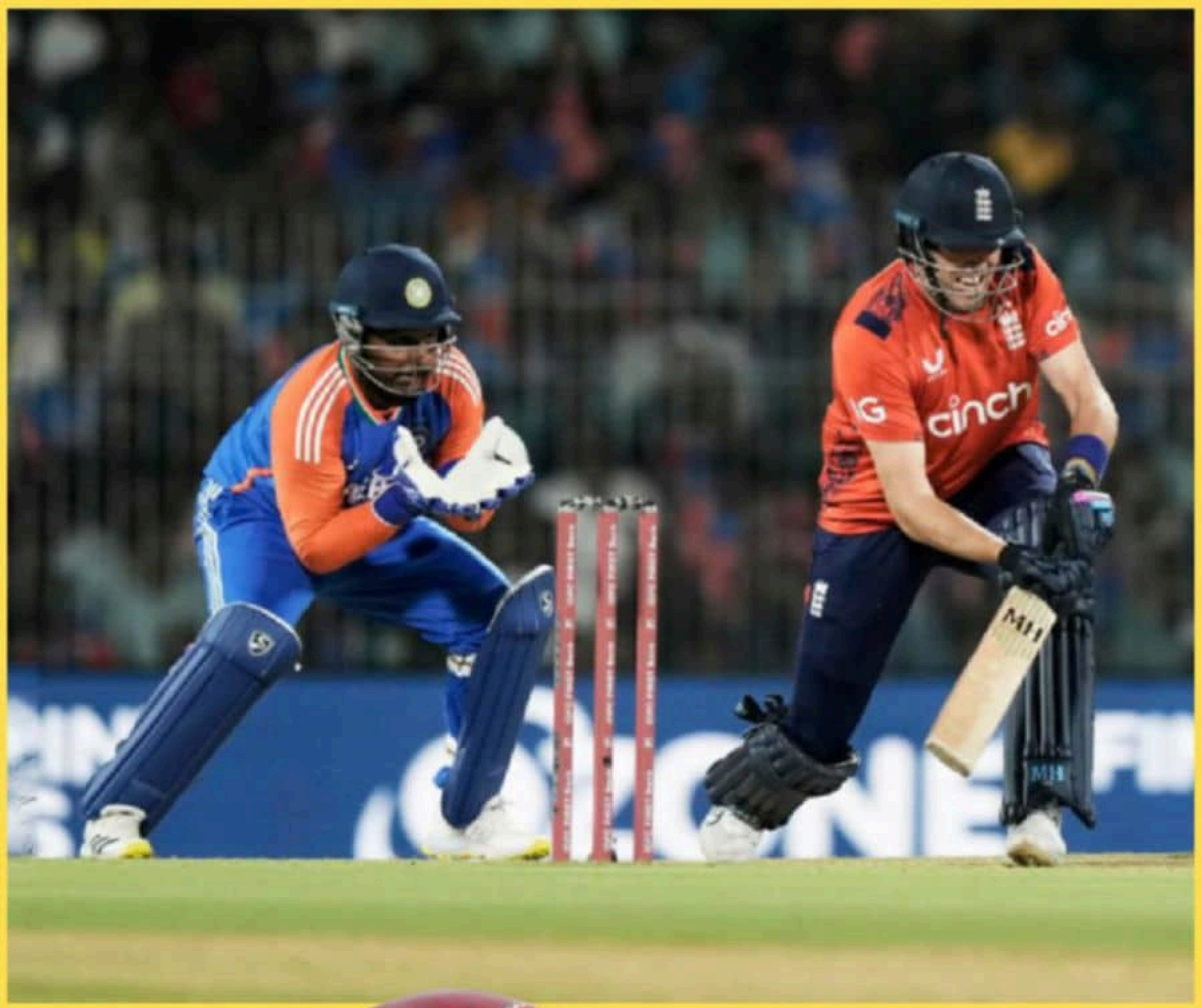
“We honestly didn't think that anyone could possibly get hit in here,” Woods said. The golf might be a hit. Woods was hoping viewers watched until the end; Homa suggested that Duke fans would still be watching, since the Blue Devils were playing Miami on ESPN after the golf ended. And Woods, who walked with his son in a tournament last month, looked like he was physically sound — at least in the sense that he didn't seem to be holding anything back while swinging.

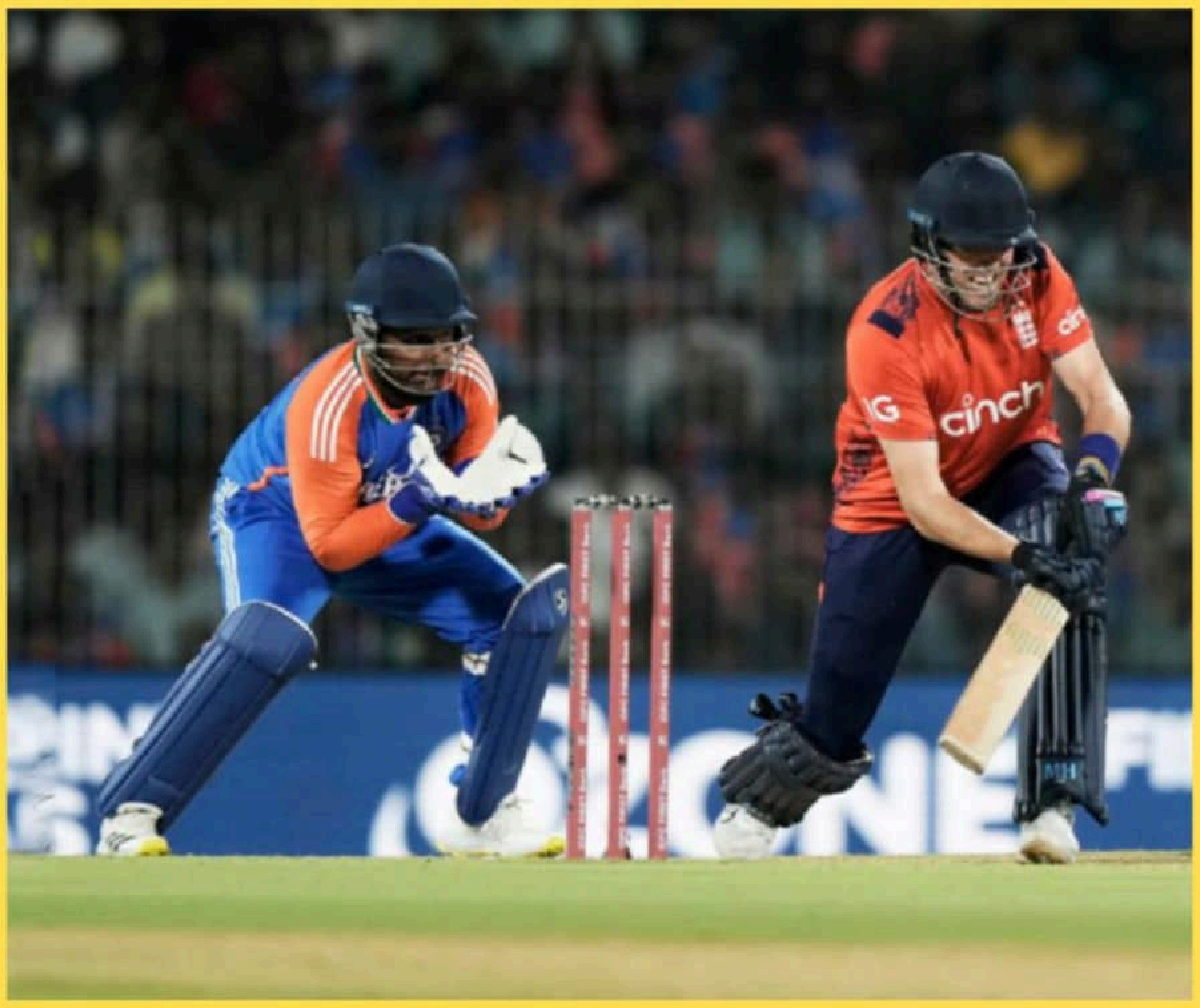
Physically, he said he felt fine. As far as the golf: “The walking's not the issue. My game's not any good," Woods said. Williams sat in the Los Angeles box just to the right of the players' teeing areas, enjoying the spectacle of the walk-out introductions, light and smoke shows and booming music.

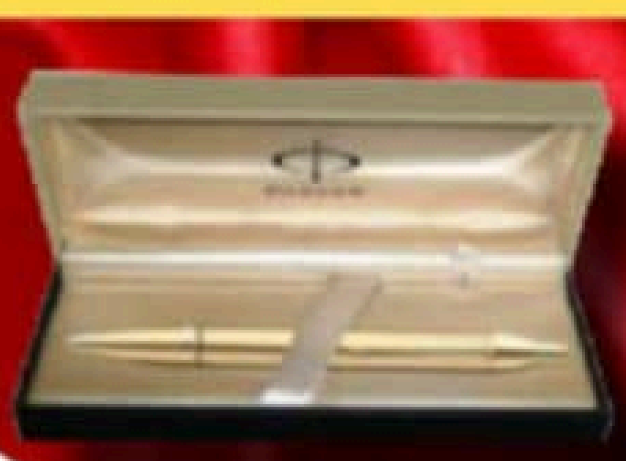
“It's so wild,” Williams said. “It's something that you see a little bit in tennis. We see it all the time in basketball, right? We don't really see it so much in golf. Actually, we never see that in golf. It's so good to kind of see their personalities and see them shine as golfers. ... It's so cool to see a new aspect.” ■

FIND SIX DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THESE TWO PICTURES

CONTEST







In this contest you have to spot six differences between both the pictures. Three lucky winners will get a Parker pen each.

RULES & REGULATIONS FOR THE CONTEST

- **Last date for entries:** March 25, 2025.
- A draw will determine the winner.
- Winners name will be announced in the next issue of cricket today.
- The prizes may vary from the one shown.
- Send in your answers along with your name, occupation, address, contact No. and Email ID at our postal address.

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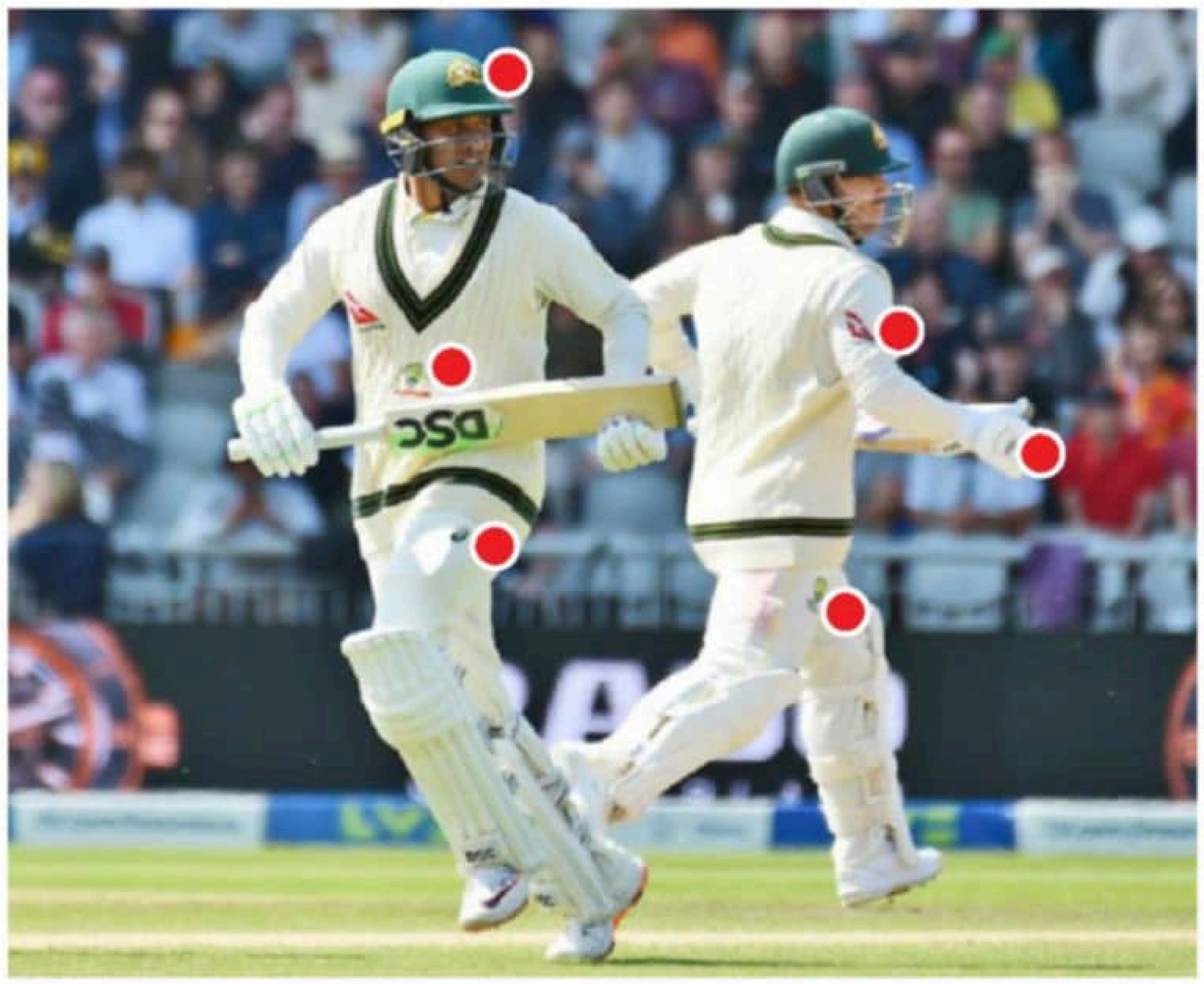
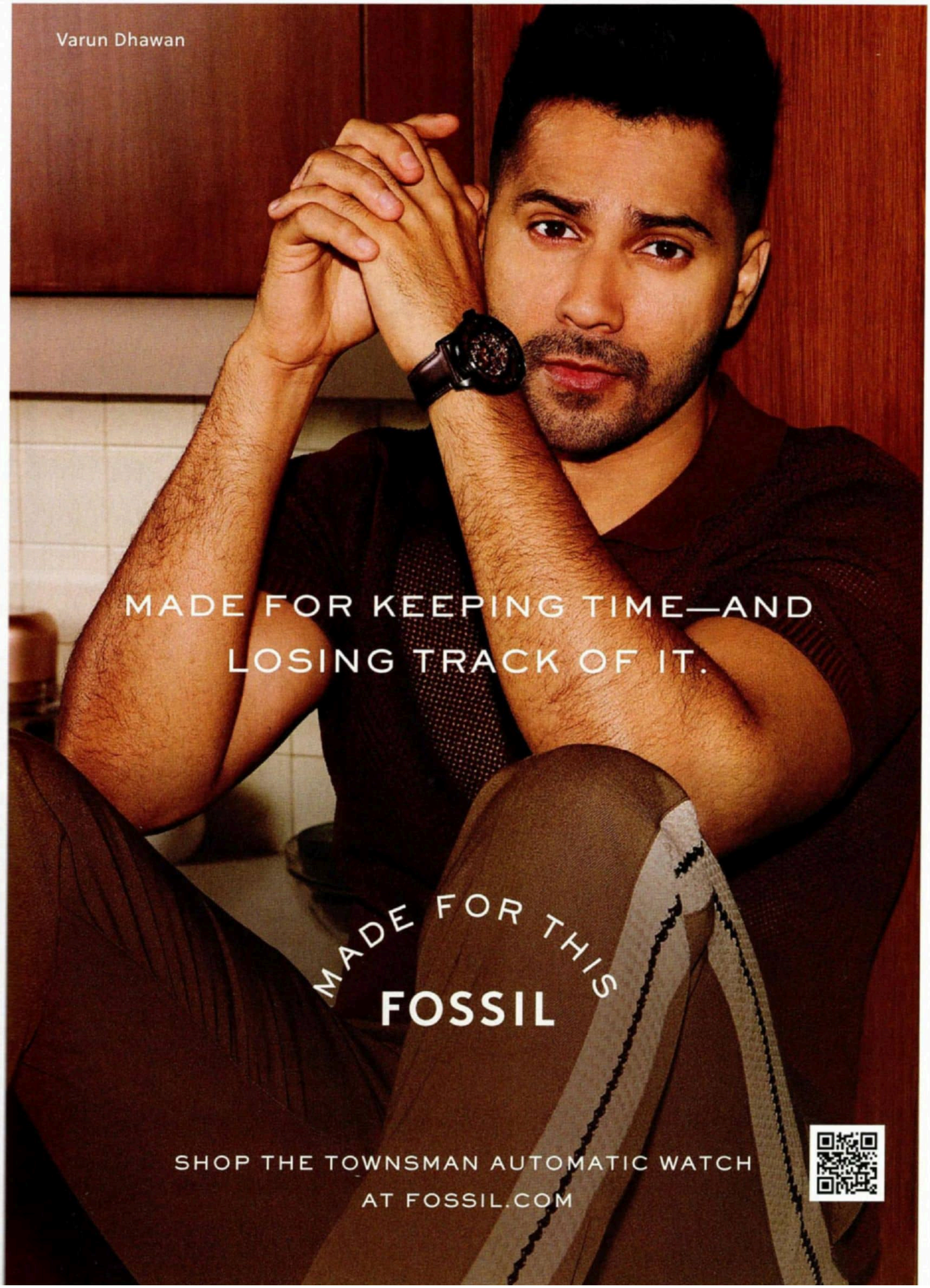


Last months's winners: Alok (Delhi), Dipanshu (Gurugram), Garima (Noida)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